

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: My seven-year-old is very shy. As a parent, what can I do?

ANSWER: Shyness as a character quality is part of how God knits a specific child together in the womb. Although fear, humiliation, failure, and rejection certainly contribute to shyness, the character quality is innate. Social failure especially increases the probability that a child will remain shy as a self-protective strategy (all behaviors have a function). When dealing with extreme introversion, **control and compensation is the goal**. A child can learn skills and techniques to make the shyness manageable, but the innate character quality will usually be present to some extent. **Overcoming shyness is a process** not an event.

Shy children are usually trapped in a spiral of disappointing experiences that serve to increase and solidify their shyness. Because they are innately shy, they often go unnoticed. Their peers perceive them as dull, boring, uncaring, and insensitive because they don't present themselves well, are self-conscious, and communicate poorly. **Shyness prevents peers from seeing the child's good qualities**. As a result of these negative experiences, the child retreats further in terms of social interactions. If this behavior is not curbed early in life, these children often have lonely, fearful, and depressed adolescent and teenage years (40% of teens describe themselves as shy).

Shyness needs to be overcome not just to improve the quality of the child's life. We Christians are called to spread the Good News. We are called to involve ourselves deeply in the lives of others in order to reveal Christ. **Shyness stands in the way**. Shyness at seven is understandable; shyness at twenty-seven is a choice (although it doesn't seem like one) to protect self rather than risk involvement with others for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

God will use this obstacle to draw both you and your child to him, if you seize this opportunity!

Consider the following for your child:

1. Have a heart-to-heart **talk with your child about shyness**. Tell her you want to help. Tell her she can learn to overcome her shyness (control and compensate). Pray with her consistently.
2. Conference with her teacher for observations and input.
3. Conference with a professional to consider other factors such as an anxiety disorder.
4. Consistently **practice** the physical aspects of overcoming shyness (i.e. eye contact, clear voice, smiles, personal hygiene, general appearance, etc.). Reward success!
5. Provide safe and numerous **opportunities for one-on-one playtime with peers** with whom your daughter feels the most comfortable. Realize that many children prefer interacting with one friend at a time. (This preference is one of the differences between introversion and extroversion.) Plan in advance some activities with your daughter that she can do with the friend. Have plans “B” and “C” in reserve.
6. Realize that this “practice” must be consistent, usually successful, and long-term for it to work. This is a process. Observe her without being too obvious. **She will require your gentle, but accurate, feedback.**
7. Model the behavior you want from her.
8. Seek out a peer socialization group if you don’t think you can teach these skills. Consult the self-help section of the bookstore for age-appropriate materials on making friends. Consider a children’s theater group to allow her to put herself in front of others.
9. Reward successes! Celebrate!
10. Help her take small, comfortable steps.
11. **Watch that you don’t overprotect her.** Pray with her about risk taking in the social world.

12. Consider an assertiveness training class.

13. Role-play situations. Make it a game.

14. As with all phobias, **gradually introduce her to more challenging situations.**

I believe her relationship with Christ is paramount in this situation. It can help her move beyond a preoccupation with self and help her relax knowing God's Spirit is within her. She has wonderful gifts to give others in the name of Christ in the context of relationships. You can help!

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