

Henderson, L. (2006, Winter). Gifted and shy. *Duke Gifted Letter*, 6, 5, 10.

<SEC>The Emotional Edge

<TI>Gifted and Shy

Alice is an introverted eight-year-old who chats happily with parents, siblings, and close friends but doesn't talk much in class. Her teacher thinks that she is struggling and suggests holding her back. Her parents are frustrated and angry; fortunately, they know that she's gifted and look for other solutions.

Allen, highly gifted, was tormented unmercifully by two bullies in junior high school. The school overlooked the problem, not out of negative intention, but because Allen did not make an overt fuss over the situation. Sensitive and peaceable, with a quiet home life, he was devastated. Thirty years later, he cannot approach a group of people at singles events. Often parents need to bring these types of circumstances and their impact on their children to the attention of school personnel.

In a culture that values extroversion, Americans believe that introversion, sensitivity, and childhood shyness are problems that need to be fixed—a belief that may be misguided, since shyness is a temperament. Yet research on gifted children shows that the majority of them are introverted, and many are sensitive due to their heightened awareness of self and others. Parents need to help these children develop social skills that fit their

temperaments. They also must educate teachers and other school personnel about the personality traits of their children and, most important, communicate that these children may be fine just the way they are.

Shy children may need a little extra time to warm up to others, may be cautious in new social situations, and may want to observe before participating. Such behaviors are not generally a cause for worry. If a child consistently avoids situations that are usually considered pleasurable and interesting, and evidences distress, loneliness, and a tendency to self-blame, it may be useful to consider a psychological evaluation. The environment needs to be examined for factors that promote problematic shyness, such as habits of shaming children into behaving a certain way or pressuring them to be extroverted.

Children whose social identity is devalued or threatened become self-conscious and inhibited. Many gifted children also hide their talents to avoid the threat of exclusion by other children. This practice exacerbates their self-consciousness, their feeling of being outsiders, and their inhibitions.

<A>Helping Your Child

Here are some strategies that parents can use to help shy children participate in school and social activities: Give your child a chance to warm up to strangers. Before school starts, take your child to school and introduce him or her to the teacher. Evaluate the teacher's interaction style. When school starts, observe the teacher during class. Collaborative learning

environments and a trusting relationship with the teacher are essential to a student's well-being.

- Seek an optimal learning environment for your child. High-stakes, competitive learning environments may give a child a good learning experience, but sensitive children can be adversely affected by them. If you notice symptoms like performance anxiety or sleep disturbance, work on supportive self-talk (see below) and relaxation exercises. It may be helpful also to consult a psychologist.
- Involve your child in extracurricular activities such as music classes, school clubs, academic competitions, or physical activities like swimming and golf or team sports. Make sure that your child spends some time with other gifted children. It also helps to associate with older friends who are not threatened by their gifts or talents.
- Arrange for your child to help younger children with schoolwork, sports, or other games or to perform some other volunteer activity to promote a sense of social competence in your child.
- Share books with your child that provide helpful role models. Children can learn social skills through literature. Look at Caldecott and Newbery Medal-winning books for titles. Consider biographies of shy children who became leaders, like Eleanor Roosevelt or Abraham Lincoln.
- Role-play social situations and brainstorm coping strategies. "What do people do when they forget what they want to say? When they stammer or blush?" Model social interactions for your child using humor to recover from gaffes or mishaps. Have your child practice approaching children and

speaking up in class, with you acting as the other child or the teacher.

Afterward, tell your child what you liked about what he or she said or did.

- Discuss your child's progress using self-supportive thoughts, such as "Social skills are learned, just like anything else." Have your child reflect on or write about both negative and positive experiences and savor behavior that worked well. Think aloud about how he or she can try new things. Encourage your child to share experiences and express emotions.
- Help your child test hypotheses about others' intentions by asking them questions or by trying new behaviors. Suggest how to invite others to play a game or to share a toy.

<A>Helping Teachers

Research indicates that the majority of teachers in primary and secondary schools in the United States and Canada are extroverted, so they may need help understanding your sensitive or introverted child. Parents need to be the communicative link between the teacher (or adult in charge) and the child.

- Explain to the teacher that your child needs time to warm up to others, is reluctant to jump into discussions, and needs more time to think through responses before speaking. Great!
- Share books on shyness and sensitivity with your child's teacher, such as Elaine Aron's [The Highly Sensitive Child](#).
- Express to the teacher the importance of emphasizing idea articulation and empathic listening. Collaborative learning such as that found in Elliot

Aronson and Shelley Patnoe's The Jigsaw Classroom is highly effective for quieter children.

- Inform the teacher of your child's stress indicators. While sensitive children often react intensely to stress, they actually do better than other children in low-stress environments. If they suddenly develop more frequent illness, the environment may not be optimal for them.
- Discuss the possibility of acceleration. Research shows that accelerating gifted students tends to have positive consequences.
- Remind the teacher that while many gifted children have independent learning styles, sensitive children who lack social support and input will drop out of highly enriching experiences. (probably all children will, but this will exacerbate it. No need to change what you've said – I just really do not want to negatively stereotype this temperament). If they are acknowledged and given positive reinforcement they will persist.

Above all, maintain age-appropriate expectations while communicating empathy and respect for your child's natural way of being. Help set manageable goals for your child and establish the means to attain them, but avoid using negative labels and exerting unrealistic pressure. Remember that shyness is a universal human experience important for prosocial adaptation.

—Lynne Henderson, PhD

<BIO>Lynne Henderson is director of the Shyness Clinic, originator of the Social Fitness Model of treatment, and founder and director, with Philip Zimbardo, of the Shyness Institute. Henderson is also a visiting scholar in

psychology at Stanford University and a faculty member in continuing studies.

<PULLQUOTE>Americans believe that introversion, sensitivity, and childhood shyness are problems that need to be fixed.

<SIDEBAR>**Web Sites**

Jigsaw Classroom

www.jigsaw.org

The Shyness Home Page

www.shyness.com

American Psychological Association shyness page

www.apa.org/topics/topicshyness.html

Books

Nurturing the Shy Child: Practical Help for Raising Confident and Socially Skilled Kids and Teens, by Barbara G. Markway and Gregory P. Markway, Thomas Dunne, 2005

The Highly Sensitive Child: Helping Our Children Thrive When the World Overwhelms Them, by Elaine Aron, Broadway, 2002

The Shy Child: A Parent's Guide to Preventing and Overcoming Shyness from Infancy to Adulthood, by Philip G. Zimbardo and Shirley L. Radl, Malor, 1999

The Jigsaw Classroom: Building Cooperation in the Classroom, 2nd edition, by Elliot Aronson and Shelley Patnoe, Longman, 1997