

WHEN SHY KIDS NEED OUR ATTENTION

Why do some shy children grow up just fine while others experience low self-esteem, school difficulties, anxiety or depression?

Historically, much attention has been paid to children who act out. *“Now we’ve come to see that children who are quiet in school or off by themselves deserve equal attention,”* says Robert J. Coplan, professor in the Department of Psychology at Carleton University and co-author of a review on social withdrawal in childhood.

Social withdrawal refers to a child’s isolating himself or herself from the peer group, most typically out of social fear and anxiety (i.e., shyness) or because of a preference for solitude (i.e., unsociability). Brain research suggests that biological factors may underlie shyness and social withdrawal. However, parenting style, the quality of the parent-child

relationship, and the quality of the children’s peer relationships all play a role in the development, moderation and outcomes of these behavioural tendencies.

Shy and withdrawn children rarely initiate contact with their peers; when they do interact with others, they appear less socially competent. They are more likely to experience peer exclusion and rejection and are at higher risk for peer victimization. From the earliest years, social withdrawal is associated with loneliness, anxiety, depressed affect and low self-esteem. It can also cause problems in school: shy children tend to participate less in the classroom and may become overly stressed by test or performance situations.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Of course, many shy and socially withdrawn children do not experience socio-emotional difficulties. Recent research suggests a

number of positive factors that may serve to “protect” these children. For example, a warm, supportive classroom environment can be beneficial. Talents or special skills also serve these children well. Above all, parents who are sensitive to their children’s characteristics and needs, who encourage independence and who provide opportunities for peer interaction (e.g., arranging play dates) help their children to become less inhibited and more socially skilled during early childhood.

Interventions specifically targeting shy and withdrawn children are just starting to be developed and implemented. *“There’s nothing wrong with being shy,”* Coplan emphasizes. *“What we want is to equip these children with coping strategies so that their shyness does not interfere with the important developmental and life tasks they need to do.”* 🐾

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BULLETIN

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