

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My son is nine years old and doesn't have any friends. He has always been incredibly shy and it seems to be getting worse. Is this something that he will outgrow?

-- Worried Mom

Dear Worried,

Shyness is a painful state that interferes with healthy functioning and the ability to create meaningful relationships. Shyness can range from a mild awkwardness in interpersonal situations, to a totally disabling social phobia. I want to be clear. I am not talking about introversion here. Introverted people are those who prefer more time alone or in small groups. Introversion is not shyness.

Shy people may experience actual panic attacks – pounding heart, sweaty palms, dizziness, tightness in the chest, and feelings of terror – when they are in social situations. In every case, however, shyness can interfere with establishing good relationships with other people, and accomplishing personal and professional goals. Shy people are unable to enjoy themselves in social situations, and may even avoid these circumstances altogether. Different situations may create different levels of social anxiety. For example, an individual may be relatively comfortable spending time with family or very close friends, but freeze in situations where they will meet new people, have to give a talk, or initiate a conversation. Unfortunately, there are many people – of all ages – who experience shyness. The research data indicate that this is an escalating problem, and now more than 50% of Americans identify themselves as being shy.

It may help your son to know that he is not alone in his feelings. Many famous people have had to overcome shyness in order to realize their potential and achieve success. Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, Annie Oakley, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Orville Wright all wrote about their painful shyness. If your nine-year old is not so impressed by these historical figures, then remind him that contemporary stars like Kevin Costner, Cher, Brad Pitt, Jim Carrey, Tom Cruise, and Tom Hanks all struggled with shyness, particularly as children, but overcame it and flourished in their careers and personal lives.

Those who have overcome shyness have worked at it, and there are some things you can do to help your son build interpersonal confidence. Don't wait and hope that he will outgrow it. Try some of these suggestions:

1. Get a better fix on the nature of your son's shyness, and the reasons behind it. Is he shy in one-to-one interactions with his peers or just in groups? Is he shy just about everywhere or only in certain circumstances? It is important to rule out other disorders (e.g., Asperger's Syndrome or other disorders of the autism spectrum) where shyness is part – but only part – of the symptoms. Has he been bullied or made fun of? It's important to understand what is driving his shyness.

2. Talk with him about his shyness and let him know that you are there to help him become more comfortable with his peers. Give him a chance to tell you how he feels.

3. Show yourself to be a healthy and confident role model. Let your son see you interact with others. Invite people to your home. Let him know that friendships are important to you. You are an important example for your son. How you relate to others teaches him a great deal.

4. Teach social skills. Give your son lots of opportunities to practice these skills and reward him for his effort. I recommend the book, "How Kids Make Friends: Secrets for Making Lots of Friends No Matter How Shy You Are." There are also many good websites that offer tips for overcoming shyness. Just type "shyness" into Google and you'll find thousands of sites with great information.

5. Help your son build his self-confidence by exploring his special skills and talents. Are any of these hobbies or sports ones that would help him to connect with others? Often shared experiences (like playing on the same Little League team or sharing an interest in a particular video game) give kids some common ground upon which to build friendships.

6. Help him to understand his emotions. Anxiety is not a comfortable state, but he can learn to manage these feelings.

I think those are some good places to start. If you do not see some measurable improvement over the next few weeks and months, it may be helpful to seek professional help from a therapist or counselor who is experienced in helping children overcome shyness.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.