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Is my child shy — or just quiet?

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By Kitty Ricafort for Yahoo! Southeast Asia

I do not have a quiet child.

Quiet children are described as private, peaceful, retrospective — creatures of few words — and tend to act the same in their comfort zone or outside of it. That is so not my three-year-old.

My daughter has a sweet, high-pitched but surprisingly powerful voice she uses quite effectively — talking, shouting, singing, laughing and demanding loudly. There's usually little I can do to tone her down when she sets her mind on something or is

Does your child morph into somebody timid in front of other people?

particularly excited about her favorite toy/show/discovery.

Trouble is, once she's out the door, she morphs into a timid, barely speaking, soft-spoken little girl who clings to my legs for dear life whenever anyone (grown-up or otherwise) starts a conversation with her.

Her preschool teachers have described her as shy and quite honestly, I've found myself explaining her behaviour to friends/relatives/acquaintances "apologetically" by saying, "Oh, she's shy" or asking my daughter publicly "Why are you being shy?" when she chooses not to greet said person or physically withdraws from the introduction.

But lately, I've started to ask myself, is being shy a condition she has to be cured of or a behaviour I should be embarrassed about?

According to Leah Davies, author of "The Shy Child," a counselor and teacher of 44 years, "Shyness is often misunderstood because it is not one emotion, but a mixture of fear, tension, apprehension and/or embarrassment. Shy children seem to lack confidence and are self-conscious especially in new surroundings or when they are the center of attention...[but] shyness is not necessarily a negative attribute. Many shy children exhibit an ability to please and think for themselves. Being reserved can also be a worthy personality trait."

Some blogs don't even want to use the sentence, "She's shy," they choose to say, "She's a thinker," "She's reserved," "She's observant" instead — highlighting it as a positive trait and quality. I love that. My daughter IS a thinker, reserved and observant.

Time and time again, while in the middle of a conversation with my husband and our three year old is within earshot, she spouts out observations that surprise and delight us with their simple but concise solutions. Example, upset at leaving his cellphone at home with several appointments scheduled during the day, my husband disappointingly rants about it in the car. Our little thinker cuts in and simply suggests, "Borrow mama's phone, dada." Or in another instance when my husband was remarking, "I can't believe it rained today, I just had the car washed!" Little observer explains almost condescendingly, "It's WATER, dada, it's water as if Daddy forgot that water IS meant to clean, so what's he complaining about?"

Shy kids are just naturally a little more cautious. By acknowledging your little one's reserved nature, parents can help teach basic manners by setting up a conducive social environment for their shy child with the following tips. These are just a few that have helped ease some of our little one's social fears and anxieties.

1. Don't make her the center of attention: Resist the urge to put the spotlight on her immediately after an introduction, ease her into it by diverting the attention away from her and onto some interesting common ground between your child and the new person she just met (i.e. "Cara also likes princesses. Maybe your Princess Polly can play with her princess?" or "Miss Lily also likes the color pink. Don't you have a pink bag like hers?")

2. Give your child time to warm up: "Just as personalities differ, kids vary tremendously, and normally, in how they relate in school — from eager beavers to quiet mice. Some children take longer than others to adjust to a daily classroom routine or to a new school, teacher, or class, but they eventually open up. Others stay shy — and there's nothing wrong with that. Normal shyness is not a problem that needs fixing", states Catherine Rauch, author of "How to Help a Shy Child Participate in School."

3. Don't forcefully make them participate in an activity: "The process of socialization takes time. In order to feel safe, shy children often stand back and watch an activity. They begin the socialisation process by observing and listening to the interactions of others. When they feel comfortable they move closer. Later, they may speak to a teacher or peer, and after time begin to relate to other children", Davies explains.

4. Prep your child beforehand what's expected of them at a visit/social setting: "I usually have a brief talk with my son before we visit friends or go to a party. I tell him what's going to happen there (i.e.: playgroup with friends, visit with grandparents, party with mommy's/daddy's friends) and that he's expected to say "hi" to the host and answer politely when asked a question. I find preparing him beforehand usually eases some of the anxiety," says Jenn Punzalan, 39, mother of four.

5. Set the example: "Heredity, culture, and environment can each play a role in a child's shyness. If a child's family tends to be aloof and sequestered, there is a likelihood that the child will be somewhat inhibited," observes Davies.

If you feel that your child is more than just shy or quiet, is noticeably withdrawn most of the time, makes little eye contact or behaves alarmingly violent towards other children or teachers, please speak with your pediatrician and discuss other methods of treatment.

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