Supporting the Child Who is Shy in the Classroom

By Mushira Shamsi

Children who feel shy may wish to hide from the world.

As a child growing up, I loved my school friends, and revered my teachers. Indeed, I have golden memories of my school life. Except for one thing…. I felt very shy in the classroom. I had a hard time speaking or being in the limelight. My teachers wrote in my report cards consistently that I was a refined but reticent child. Most teachers accepted my quietness, were kind and tried to help me emerge from my shell. However, I had one teacher who was angry with me for not participating more in class. So great was her annoyance that one day, when she asked a question and as usual, I did not raise my hand, she threw the blackboard eraser at me and shouted furiously, "I ***know*** you know the answer but you just won't answer!" Luckily, I ducked and was not hurt. Shockingly violent as this outburst was, the point to note is that this teacher did not understand my trait of shyness[1]. It is more likely, however, that teachers overlook children who are shy because of their silent obedience.

In the heart of every early childhood professional lies the deep

desire to reach, touch and inspire all children in the classroom so that they may bloom and grow to their maximum heights. Children who feel shy, perhaps because of the quiet cocoon they may live in, often get overlooked and may thus not reach the promise of their potential. Educators may not only have disregarded these children, but also the whole issue this implies for the actualization of human capability. This article presents a focused and respectful understanding of and strategies for teachers to help the child who feels shy move forward toward emotional liberty and security. In her book *Complete Confidence*, Hankin (2004) says, "To be confident, a person must walk a path of freedom, arriving at a place called Emotional Maturity" (p.1).

Understanding Shyness

Definition

The research on shyness is limited. According to Blankson, O'Brien, Leerkes, Marcovitch, and Calkins (2011), "Although there are currently different conceptualizations about the origins and definitions of shyness, one common thread among various definitions is that shyness involves wariness about, and fear of, people and social stimuli that are unfamiliar" (p. 106). Shyness is seen as a predisposition to be fearful of being rejected by others and causes inhibited behavior, quietness, awkwardness, and discomfort in social situations.

Statistics

Butler (2008) indicates that only about five percent of adults believe they have never been shy at all, and about 80% of people say that they experienced periods of pronounced shyness during childhood and adolescence. It seems that over half the people

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[1] Editor's note: There is NEVER a reason for violent behavior towards children.

who felt shy grow out of the problem to a large degree, but about 40% of people in America still describe themselves as shy.

Causes

Although there is agreement among researchers that shyness may be an inherited trait, what is significant for teachers is there is even stronger agreement between authorities on this subject, that environment and child guidance may determine ultimately whether a child will be shy or not (Shapiro, 2000). Studies by Blankson, O'Brien, Leerkes, Marcovitch, and Calkins, (2011) indicate shyness is modified when parents and teachers are taught to guide their young children to be more at ease.

Children who feel shy may be apprehensive and fearful.

In their longitudinal study, Zhang et al. (2017) conclude that, "Given the early emergence of negative social and academic correlates of shyness, efforts to improve shy children's school adjustment may be needed to occur early in the school years" (p.477).

Features of Shyness and Related Strategies for Teachers

Physical Features of Shyness

Based on a neurobiological analysis, shyness can be seen as an over-generalized fear response. According to Carducci (1999) the main physical effects of shyness as a stress response may include dry mouth, clammy hands, upset stomach, tension headaches, faintness, stuttering, pounding heart, sheepish grin, downcast eyes, silence, and speaking in an unnatural voice. Zimbardo (1981) suggests that adrenaline may shoot up, pulse may race, stuttering or silence may follow, butterflies may flutter around the stomach and a blush may follow.

Five Strategies for Addressing Physical Features of Shyness. Teachers can address the physical traits of shyness to support children in the classroom in several ways. Here are some ideas.

1. Relaxation techniques. Deep breathing, yoga, music, quiet reading, stretching, stress-relieving toys and solitary spaces in the classroom help to disengage the stress response (Foxman, 2004). Shapiro (2000) suggests that we teach the child to take three steps forward when she is afraid to do something new, and to take a deep slow breath after each step. This will have the combined effect of bringing her closer to the situation that is making her nervous and also keeping her anxious feelings in check.

2. A well-organized environment. A predictable schedule calms the agitated brain. Zimbardo (1981) suggests arriving a little earlier can ease the children who are shy into the classroom, and parents can help with this. Having an aquarium with fish swimming peacefully, softer light and calming music are also a help.

3. The process of growth through play. Play is natural, non-threatening, self-paced, and low stress for children of all ages. Using play as the vehicle for teaching and learning is optimal for all children, but especially meaningful for the child who feels shy.

4. Affirmations in physical ways. A loving touch or hug is worth a thousand words. A daily, warm, individual greeting starts the day well for the child who feels shy.

5. Smooth, well-planned transitions. For older children, time reminders, as well as smart techniques to move children gradually from one activity to another reduces stress; for infants Shapiro (2000) recommends making sure baby has a comfort object like a teddy to ease transitions

Socio-emotional Features of Shyness

Longitudinal studies by Tu & Erath (2013) point to shyness as being connected to social disturbances such as behavior inhibition, peer rejection, anxiety, depression, and loneliness in preschool years, with these relationships extending into adolescence.

The main socio-emotional effects of shyness, according to Han, Wu, Tian, Xu, and Gao (2014) include anxiety, low self-esteem, and withdrawal from social interactions. Children who feel shy are more prone to peer rejection, loneliness, and are likely to be

Shyness as a trait persists as children grow unless addressed.

ucators should give children strokes for effort, not just results, build on talents, hobbies, and interests while at the same time avoiding pushing children further into their shell by forcing performance of talents. This elicits shyness.

5. Opportunities for healthy social interaction. Educators must gently introduce friends or new experiences into their comfort zone first and later scaffold them to widen this zone. Teach the words and provide practice for pleasantries, etiquette that helps to form relationships. Placing an emphasis on cooperation and consideration in class rather than competition, and staying away from any comparisons between children helps. Teachers must never single children out or humiliate them, and any bullying must be immediately addressed.

more dependent on the teacher. This does not promote the establishment of good teacher-child relationship and peer relationship. Shyness has a negative correlation with positive emotions.

Five Strategies for Addressing Socio-emotional Features of Shyness. Teachers can support children who feel shy in the classroom in several ways to build their socio-emotional coping skills, as well as by changing educator attitudes toward children.

1. Recognition of their condition. Witkin (1999) suggests seeing shyness as a trait, not a flaw. Educators should try seeing the world from the child's perspective and help put shyness into perspective by sharing how each person is unique and special and should be loved for who they are. Rather than the label of one who is "shy", identifying the child as someone who is a good listener, as a deep thinker, and as respectful of others' opinions, is helpful.

2. Positive messages. Aim at appreciation and encouragement (over global empty praise), which are crucial for healthy self-esteem. Children who feel shy will also benefit from positive self-talk (Foxman, 2004).

3. Authoritative guidance style. This style of guidance helps the child know that the love of their teachers is unconditional. Blame and criticism intensify shyness, so guidance should focus on clear communication skills, clarity, consistency, calmness, and responsive respect.

4. Extra recognition and boosting of unique talents. Teachers can understand every child's unique way of smartness and can identify and build upon the child's strengths, thus enhancing self-esteem and shaping their personalities (Foxman, 2004). Ed-

Cognitive Features of Shyness

Shyness strongly affects the child in learning situations. Blankson et al. (2011) indicate that some cognitive factors linked to shyness include reduced concentration on the current assignment and constricted intake, storage and retrieval of incoming information. One is unable to pluck up the courage to ask questions in the classroom, thus losing out on learning opportunities. The nagging feeling of inadequacy may lead to a need for approval from others. Saying 'no' may be difficult and may cause taking up more responsibility than one is capable of handling. These children may become perfectionists, pushing themselves to overwhelming limits to gratify others.

Five Strategies for Addressing Cognitive Features of Shyness. Teachers can address the cognitive characteristics that plague children who feel shy in the classroom by using several strategies themselves and teaching them to children as well

1. The art of rehearsal. Rehearsing new situations helps the child who is shy. Shapiro (2000) suggests that if the child is afraid of birthday parties, teachers can have a pretend birthday party with stuffed animals. Being concrete helps visualization of all detailed sequences, so there are no surprises. This cognitive rehearsal helps connections between the emotional and thinking brain to flow.

2. Articulation of feelings. Educators must listen, understand, provide vocabulary, and paraphrase what children are feeling. Understanding and acceptance of one's feelings brings peace.

Every child who feels shy can be successful.

3. Sharing one's story of shyness. Educators can tell how they overcame their shyness and thus be role models (Carducci, 1999). Children can see their teachers as live examples who demonstrate how to be "successfully shy" by developing coping strategies for this condition.

4. Supportive classroom structures. Planning mixed-age pairings is a good idea according to Zimbardo (1981). When older children who feel shy are paired with younger children for brief periods, they become less withdrawn later in groups their own age. Small group activities and one-to-one pairings in projects ease shyness. Offering private help in preparing speeches and recitals will also help.

5. More time to respond to questions. After asking a question, we must wait a little longer for the child to come up with an answer. More processing time helps children who feel shy in the classroom increase their comfort level and reduce the pressure to respond.

Conclusion

Studies by researchers Han, Wu, Tian, Xu, and Gao (2014) and also Sette, Baumgartner, and Schneider (2014) verify that warm, open and close relationships of children who feel shy with teachers, along with teacher support and guidance, does moderate and mitigate the negative effects of shyness. Recognizing, understanding, and working with the emotion of shyness in the classroom will unlock the hidden potential of those children who experience it. Teachers are in the perfect position to empower children who feel shy to realize their full and immense promise. Whether shyness is a friend or a foe depends upon our awareness and how we address it in our classrooms. Every child who is shy in the classroom can shine.

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