

**Between Teacher & Parent: Helping the Child Who Is Extremely Shy**

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by Adele M. Brodtkin, Ph.D.

**“I Can’t Look at You”**

**Helping a child manage shyness**

**The Teacher’s Story**

“Good morning, Steven. I am so glad to see you,” I said, reaching out to the 4-year-old. Steven is our newcomer. In fact, this is his first experience in an early childhood program, so I shouldn’t be surprised by his reluctance to respond. Still, this morning I wondered again how we could win this boy’s trust. Steven senior and junior were walking hand in hand toward the little one’s cubby. Neither had responded to my greeting, although the parent offered a brief apologetic glance. There is a shyness in his Dad’s eyes as well, I thought.

Happily, though, neither father nor son has any hesitancy about interacting with the other. And Steven seems at ease with the children. This morning, he smiled and willingly accepted Ralph’s invitation to “do blocks and trucks.” The two boys were soon engaged in an animated discussion, interrupted only by Steven’s hugging his dad good-bye. He has done well with separating, after so few days. But Steven still won’t look any unfamiliar adult in the eye. The family has been thinking of having him join the group that travels here by school bus. However, the driver has made no headway in befriending Steven. Even when the driver offered to show him how the bus doors open and close and invited Steven to try it with him didn’t do the trick. We’re all rather stymied in our efforts to befriend Steven. Are we trying too hard or not hard enough?

**The Parent’s Story**

It was my wife’s idea to have Steven start preschool so he’d get ready for kindergarten. But I am wondering if he is still too young to be so far from home. We have a family farm quite a ways out of town. It’s a long ride in and back. And there’s always plenty for Steven to do there. He plays nicely with his cousins and younger brothers, even helps me with little chores. Most of all, I worry because Stevie acts so different in school. At home, he is full of fun. He’s warm and friendly with his relatives, both grown-ups and kids. Here he seems scared of the teachers, although he won’t talk about it. He doesn’t object to coming to school. Of course, these are probably the first unfamiliar grown-ups my boy has been with since the day he was born. Where we live, the mailman, garage mechanic, storekeepers, neighbors, and even farmhands have been around all his life. Then, too, morning arrivals at school are a bit tough for my wife and me—so many new people, parents, drivers, and teachers. And Steven won’t look at or answer any of the adults. It’s upsetting to see him so uncomfortable. What can we do to help?

### **Dr. Brodtkin's Assessment**

Steven's reaction to starting school provides a glimpse of two equally important influences on a child's behavior: temperament and experience. This 4-year-old may be predisposed to shyness with strangers, since his parents also find meeting new people somewhat challenging. Patience and time are probably going to do the trick, so no one should feel compelled to turn things around in a great hurry. In fact, that could turn out to be more of a hindrance than a help.

### **What the Teacher Can Do**

The key to winning any child's trust is patience and respect for his or her individuality. In other words, just be there whenever Steven is ready to interact, and do so on his terms. For example, the teacher might tone down her genuinely warm greetings and approach Steven with a gentle "Hi" and a kind smile. Don't avoid him, of course, but do give him space. Show interest in a project he may be doing. While traveling across the classroom toward the end of free play, stop to ask a casual question about whatever Steven and Ralph have built. Then, when Ralph jumps right in to explain, Steven might surprise himself and you by adding an idea or two. And, just as sensitively, befriend Steven's parents, putting them at ease. Let them know that their son's reaction to starting school is very understandable and, whenever possible, compliment their child. With the right gentle hints, you could earn an invitation to visit their farm. That might involve taking the class on a field trip and allowing Steven to lead the tour. Bridging his two worlds in this way could boost the child's confidence and begin the process of putting him at ease.

### **What the Parents Can Do**

Steven's mom was wise to decide on this year of preschool as social preparation for kindergarten. And it should be a successful effort if the parents and teachers work together. There is already so much to be pleased about in Steven's adaptation to school. Best of all is the fact that he's making new friends. While large groups of strangers are intimidating to Steven's mom and dad, they might do well to befriend one or two parents of Steven's playmates. They could invite Ralph and his family over for a corn husking, for example—introducing them to the farm animals, demonstrating the way to approach them. A fresh cup of cider and doughnuts shared on the farm may go a long way toward cementing friendships for both children and adults.

### **When to Wonder**

- If many months go by and, despite all these efforts, there is no sign that Steven's trust in the adults in school is growing.
- If Steven begins to balk about going to school or loses interest in playing with classmates.
- If Steven begins to avert the gaze of any other person, including children and even members of his family.

## Resources

- *Challenging Behaviors in Early Childhood Settings*, by Susan Hart Bell, et al. (Paul H. Brookes: Publishing Co., 2004; \$tk)
- *American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, Your Child*, editor in chief David B. Pruitt, M.D. (Harper Resource, 2000; \$tk)
- *The Transition to Kindergarten*, by Robert C. Pianta and Martha J. Cox (Brookes, 1999; \$tk)

## Helping Children Manage Shyness

*Shyness* is a general term used for behavior that has several different bases. The extensive research of Professor Jerome Kagan, at Harvard, describes two main types of shy children: those who are temperamentally shy from birth, which is evident by their second birthdays, and those who don't become shy until a few years later. Shyness in this latter group (into which Steven seems to fit) is usually related to social inexperience (Steven's situation), overprotection, or stress. Since Steven's shy behavior is limited to adults in the school, he would not be considered temperamentally shy. Therefore, changes in the world around him, such as those recommended to his teachers and parents, are likely to lead to a lessening of the shy behavior.

On the other hand, 10 to 15 percent of children are born with a predisposition to shyness. In their cases, providing a calm, affectionate, predictable, yet moderately demanding and encouraging, home and school life can, over time, help to ease the shyness. But true temperamental shyness as a biologically built-in trait is difficult to completely reverse. Some, though not all, such children are likely to feel somewhat shy inside, even as their social circles widen with age.

Parents and teachers should understand this and be patient with them. Time, growth, and experience will help many to feel at home in groups, but it is wise to begin with groups of two or three. The teacher and parent working together can plan a strategy of pairing a shy child with one other child, gradually increasing the size of groups in which he works and plays. Let him select one playmate at a time to visit after school or on weekends. Steven's parents, who actually seem more likely to be innately shy people than their son is, would do best meeting with the teacher alone or with just one other family from school at a time, rather than with a large parent-teacher group.

Dr. Kagan reports that temperament doesn't make shyness inevitable. What tips the balance is the environment. So Steven's parents made a wise decision to increase their child's social comfort zone by sending him to preschool. He is likely to grow more and more at ease, as are they, when the family moves out of its familiar territory to discover a supportive, broader world.

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