WHAT IS SHYNESS AND HOW TO OVERCOME IT

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YOUNG REVIEWERS:

SHAI
AGE: 9

In today's world, there are many situations in which teamwork, communication skills, and leadership are highly valued. In these situations, shy people may have a disadvantage. The challenges they face may prevent them from achieving their goals, possibly resulting in feelings of disappointment. This article will present current knowledge on the subject of shyness, based on various research methods. I will explain what "shyness" actually is, discuss what causes it, and describe some of the day-to-day consequences. The article will examine several questions: are kids born shy or do they develop shyness? What role do parents play? What does shyness look like in various settings? In terms of school, how do teachers see shy students, and what can be done to support these students and help them deal with their fears?

WHAT IS SHYNESS?

Shyness is characterized by feelings of fear, stress, and discomfort in social situations. When attention is directed at a shy person, that

person exhibits physical symptoms of stress: accelerated heartbeat, sweating and trembling, and sometimes blushing. If you are not shy, try to think of something else that makes you anxious—flying perhaps, or school exams? Or maybe you have a fear of heights or spiders? Does just thinking about that situation make you feel stressed? That is how many shy people feel in social situations.

In scientific studies, shyness is measured in several ways. One of the most common ways is a questionnaire in which people report about themselves, or others report about them. The questionnaire has sentences that describe the inner experiences of shy people—such as difficulty talking to strangers or feeling confused in social situations—that young people can relate to [1].

Not every social situation is equally stressful for shy people, but certain situations—such as working with new people, a conversation with a teacher or boss, or talking to a romantic interest—may cause particularly high levels of stress. In these situations, shy people tend to be preoccupied with thoughts such as "What does this person think of me?" or sometimes even "How can I escape?".

WHAT CAUSES SHYNESS?

Shyness is considered an aspect of personal **temperament**, but studies have found quite a few factors that may reduce it or increase it. First, if shy people feel judged—for example, if they are told "You have nothing to be afraid of!"—they may think their feelings are abnormal, and that no one else feels the same way. Therefore, shy people should be able to have their feelings heard. Parents should try to recognize their child's shyness and take the child's concerns seriously. However, it is important that parents do not do things for the child that the child could do themselves. For example, if a shy child can approach the salesperson in a store, it is essential that the parents do not do it for the child. The pattern of attitudes and behaviors of parents toward their children is called their **parenting style**. Warmth, understanding, and giving children as much independence as possible are aspects of a parenting style that may help to reduce shyness.

Some factors may increase shyness, such as social rejection and ridicule from other children. Adolescence is a particularly vulnerable time, in which shyness may intensify. In adolescence, as a normal part of the identity-formation process, children can be very concerned about what others think about them. They may worry about this even when others are not thinking about them at all! This phenomenon is called an **imaginary audience,** and it can increase shyness because it causes adolescents to be even more worried about what others think of them.

TEMPERAMENT

A set of traits, based on biological and psychological factors, that determines how a person reacts to the world. Some traits may be inherited and others may be learned.

PARENTING STYLE

The combination of attitudes and actions that influences the way a parent brings up their child.

IMAGINARY AUDIENCE

A psychological phenomenon that happens mostly in adolescents, in which they feel that all eyes are on them, and that everyone is thinking about them.

Nevertheless, studies show that there are shy students who do just fine; they have close friends and do not face bullying. These children were found to have a good ability to control their emotions in stressful situations [2]—even when they are very excited or stressed, they know how to hide it and not attract attention. This is called **emotional regulation**. In contrast, children who clearly show their emotions in stressful situations can attract attention and experience bullying and harassment from other children.

However, the ability to hide shyness also has a downside: studies have shown that there are some types of shy children that adults do not recognize as being shy [3]. Instead, they are perceived as loners or as arrogant/snobbish (yes, the behavior of shy people is sometimes interpreted this way). In such cases, the concerns of these shy children are not addressed, and they do not receive the help they need.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF SHYNESS?

There are some advantages of being shy. For example, shy people usually have excellent imaginations and the ability to develop rich, inner worlds, and they often try to be sensitive to others. These characteristics are very important in our fast, connected, and noisy world. In a world of screens, shy people can often manage quite well; they can do many things without having to leave the house and without the need to meet people face to face, which solves a lot of their problems. But this is also risky: avoiding face-to-face social interactions may *increase* fears about interacting with others until it becomes too difficult to try. Gradually, the world of the shy person can become smaller and smaller.

Shy students do not have it easy at school. They may feel uncomfortable participating in class and asking questions, and they may not always say what they need. Shy students may feel stressed in less-structured situations, such as during recess or on a school trip. If they are asked to work in groups, some shy children will feel stressed because it requires talking in front of people. Even later in life, shy people may have a difficult time. They may refuse a job offer or a possible promotion because it requires talking to new people. In their personal lives, they may stay in relationships they are not satisfied with because it is too difficult for them to form new ones. Over the years, shy people may develop feelings of disappointment because they missed out on opportunities, all because their shyness prevented them from taking chances, expressing themselves, or trying new things.

HOW CAN TEACHERS HELP SHY STUDENTS?

A research study has shown that teachers might not sufficiently understand shy students. For example, according to the study, teachers are more likely to define a shy child based on what that child's behavior looks like vs. what is actually causing the behavior. For example, they may define a shy child as "a child who does not participate in class", rather than "a child that feels uncomfortable when all eyes are on her/him" (Figure 1) [4]. This is important because, to help shy students and address their fears, teachers must understand the inner experiences of these children. After all, there may be other children in class who do not participate for reasons other than shyness.

Figure 1

The figure shows a question (formulated as a sentence) about what a shy student is, and two possible answers. The first answer refers to the observed behavior of the student, while the second (more accurate) answer refers to the student's inner experience, which is the key to understanding and overcoming shyness (Image credit: Anat Korem and Yotam Shevach).
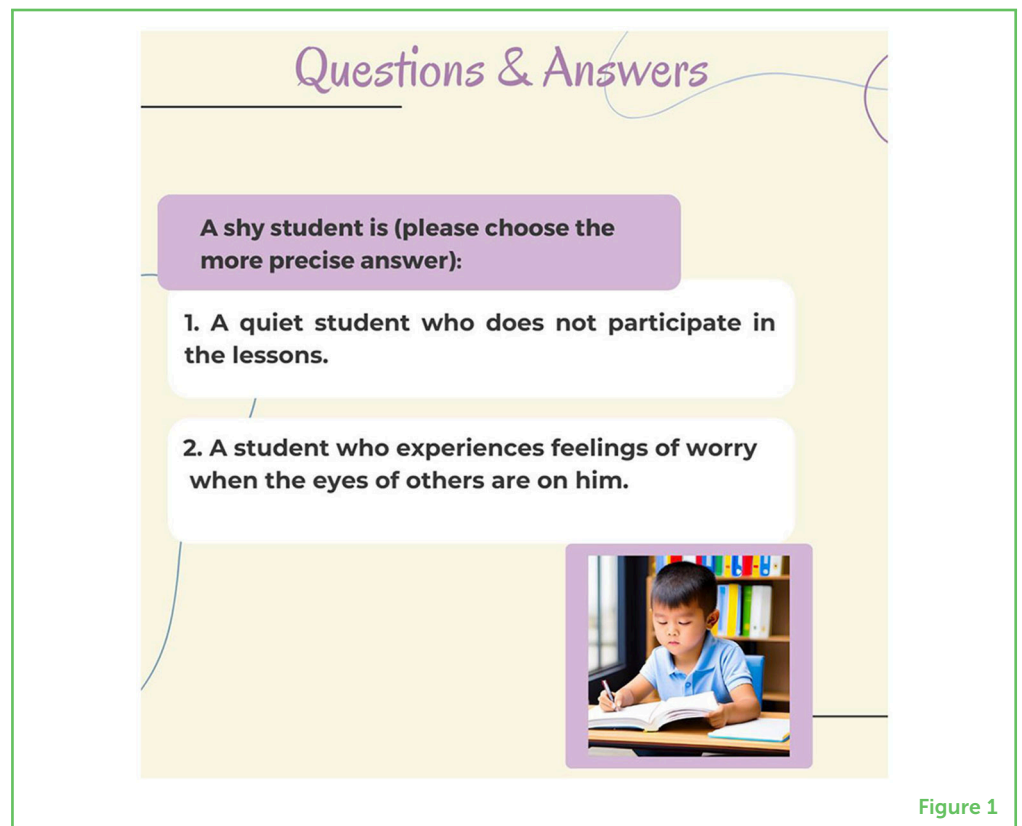
Figure 1

In the same study, teachers proposed a variety of strategies to support shy students, such as creating a personal relationship with the student or providing positive reinforcement. Additional strategies are shown in Figure 2.

One of the scientifically proven ways of treating anxiety of any kind, including shyness, is to divide the anxiety into smaller portions. For example, if a shy student finds it very difficult to speak in front of the class, perhaps the student could present to a group of four children instead. If this is also too difficult, maybe the student can present to only one partner, or read from a prepared text. Finally, if these things are still overwhelming, perhaps the student can record the

Figure 2

presentation beforehand and play it for the class. For teachers, the idea is to look for activities that cause the shy student such a low level of anxiety that the student will agree to do it. Then, the teacher could have the student repeat the action over and over, until it becomes easy for them. Studies show that, over time, this method can gradually help shy people to do more and more, decreasing their fears about social situations [2, 5].

By understanding what causes shyness and the strategies for overcoming it, you can start to use them in situations in your own life, if you struggle with shyness. If you have trouble coming up with ways to apply these ideas, you can try talking to your school counselor. Together, you may be able to figure out ways to overcome some of your fears, expand your experiences, and enjoy more of the social opportunities around you.

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YOUNG REVIEWERS

SHAI, AGE: 9
I have three brothers. My favorite food is a hamburger. I love history and read many books on the subject. In my spare time I enjoy board games and logic puzzles, playing football, and also escape rooms.
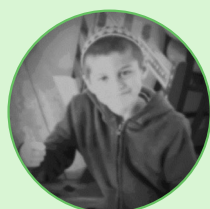
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Anat has a Ph.D. in education from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She is a senior lecturer in education at the Levinsky-Wingate Academic College and is a faculty member in school counseling at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Anat is greatly interested in the social skills of children, adolescents, and adults, including questions such as: why are there adolescents who feel lonely in the digital world? How are close friendships formed? How can we help children who are socially rejected? She finds the subject of shyness particularly interesting because she was a shy child and teenager, and as a researcher she seeks to develop a deep understanding of the phenomenon by researching related topics, publishing articles, and presenting research at international conferences. She also manages a national research center that connects parents and teachers, and she edits an

academic journal on this topic. In her free time she enjoys walking in nature, reading, writing, listening to music, dancing, and playing sports (Photography credit: Gur Oren). *anat.korem@mail.huji.ac.il