

Helping Shy and Anxious Children

By HopkinsHealth,

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Johns Hopkins Commentary: Helping Shy and Anxious Children

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Parents who dismiss their child's fear of school, parties or separation from Mom or Dad as "just shyness" may be depriving their children of help that can vastly improve their children's social skills. In part two of this HopkinsHealth interview on shyness and anxiety, John Walkup, M.D., associate professor of psychiatry in the Division of Adolescent and Child Psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, says help can take a variety of forms, from behavior modification to medication.

HopkinsHealth: What should parents do if they have a shy child?

Dr. Walkup: Parents intuitively respond to shyness by helping their children avoid the situations that stir up emotions. That's the right response in the short term, but not in the long term. In a measured way, they need to do something to get these children out into the situations where they are shy or that they try to avoid. They need to have practice discussions. "At the party you might say this..." They need to teach them how to say "hi." They can prepare them with five questions to ask other people they meet. Parents need to think: "What's going to make you uncomfortable?" And, then, teach their child the skills to cope with that. Avoidance is the big problem and tends to increase over time unless there is some plan to make sure it does not get worse. If you avoid one party, then it isn't going to be any easier to attend the next one. Pretty soon you're avoiding parties, then you avoid Scouts, and then it's the church group. So it's not the shyness per se that we worry about, it's these avoidance behaviors. A child who is shy can be motivated to not avoid situations because they are shy. When you talk to adults who were shy as children, that's what they did. They pushed themselves to do what made them uncomfortable and developed the skills to overcome their shyness. Toastmaster and Dale Carnegie courses have been very useful for adults.

HH: What works with kids?

Dr. Walkup: For children, any structured group activity, especially if it includes more physical activity, can be useful to practice being more outgoing. Activities that require a lot of verbal interaction may be more difficult and not as useful.

HH: When should parents work on this?

Dr. Walkup: As soon as you see it, even with very young children, you can begin to help your child to do those things that make him nervous. This sounds easier than it is sometimes. When you push your child, he will often protest; and anxious children often protest quite effectively. As a parent it is very difficult to push your child to do things that upset him or her. Most parents end up passively supporting their youngster's anxiety because it is too hard to push them. After a time we also see parents begin to disagree about how to manage a shy or anxious child. Dad says, "Oh, send him to the party, he'll be fine." And then Mom says, "But he'll be nervous." The parents are in conflict about the child instead of working together to overcome the problem.

HH: Does medication help?

Dr. Walkup: We're doing studies now about medication management for kids as young as 6. We're using the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, specifically fluvoxamine. No one would ever prescribe that for shyness, but we do prescribe it for anxiety disorders. You can also use behavioral modification techniques. You say to the child, "Let's develop a strategy for going

there. What do you think is going to happen?" The message we want to give to kids is, "You may be shy, but you can do this."

HH: How often does shyness occur?

Dr. Walkup: Well, that depends on whether it is state-dependent, related to an illness, or trait-dependent, related to personality. A conservative estimate of anxiety disorders in children is about 2 percent to 4 percent. The number who actually get treatment is much less.

HH: Who should be the first person the parent calls? The pediatrician?

Dr. Walkup: Yes, and for most kids, that works out fine. But pediatricians tend to see healthy children, so they tend to see shyness and anxiety as something that's not a major problem. If you think your child has a problem you really need to communicate your concern to your pediatrician. Since anxiety tends to run in families, too, the parents of an anxious child often are anxious themselves. Sometimes health care providers mistakenly think, "Oh, it's just that the parent is anxious and so the child is picking up on that." When we see a parent and a child who are nervous, we tend to think more about genetics than we tend to think that the parent is training the child to be anxious like them. The pediatrician is always the right first person to go to, and the mental health professional is next. It would be great if we could easily discriminate between children who will grow out of anxiety and the ones who need more help. It is difficult to go see a psychiatrist, but if you do and the psychiatrist says, "He's fine," then you're done; you can rest more easily. If people call me to ask whether they should get an evaluation, I usually encourage them to come in. Also, if it becomes more serious, the family has made the contact with the mental health professional. If problems develop in the future, then you have someone who knows you and can provide the help you need.