



Helping the Shy Student

by Debra Fulghum Bruce

It's not easy being shy. Just observe a shy student hesitantly interact with classmates. If you are shy, then you already know the symptoms—excessive anxiety, overwhelming feelings of insecurity, pounding heart, frozen facial muscles, and gnawing stomachache.

If you aren't shy, imagine how you might normally be a bit self-conscious in a group setting. Then, greatly magnify these high-anxiety feelings to the point that you constantly focus on how others perceive you. Your thoughts may run like, *They hate me, or I'll never fit in here, or What will I say if the teacher speaks to me?* Ultimately you may close the door to any relationships or even personal growth.

Shyness Is More Than an Uncomfortable Feeling

Shyness causes intense self-focus, a preoccupation with one's thoughts, feelings, and personal reactions. It ranges from being a bit self-conscious when asked to read aloud, to being socially awkward during class sharing, to having specific phobias that keep a person from having a normal life.

Shyness may be caused by an environmental situation or "trigger," such as authorities (teachers), strangers (the pastor or principal), opposite sex (peers or adults), or group situations (when asked to read or answer a ques-

tion). Scientific evidence points to a hereditary predisposition to shyness, just as the child may inherit a tendency toward diabetes, asthma, or obesity. There is valid research to support the theory that our temperaments, whether outgoing or shy, are slated well before birth.

Why is Shyness a Concern?

In itself, shyness is not a mental disorder; but if it is not recognized and treated, it may develop



into social phobia or anxiety-disorder, which is the third most common psychological problem in the United States. It affects more than 15 million Americans, including children. This disorder is a marked and persistent fear of situations that expose the person to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others. If a child has social phobia she may be afraid of acting in a way that will be

humiliating or embarrassing. For example, a common social situation, such as classmates singing "Happy Birthday," may cause anxiety. Instead of feeling honored and excited that friends care about her, the moment they shout, "Surprise!" she may experience panic, crying, or all-out fear.

Helping the Shy Child

Here are some teaching tips to help you boost the shy child's inner confidence.

Tip #1: Do an assessment.

Is the child really shy? Does this hinder her interaction with other students or block her from participating in class? Don't mistake a cautious or quiet child for a seriously shy one.

Tip #2: Talk with the child.

Use time before and after class to develop a relationship. Talk about moments when you felt timid or shy and the "symptoms and thoughts" that went along with these times. Let the child know that she is loved as a child of God just the way she is.

Tip #3: Take the child seriously.

When she does volunteer information in class—even if it is inappropriate—address her with respect.

Tip #4: Suggest but don't push.

Give the child some ideas to help her in class. For example, you may suggest that it is not necessary to look directly at you when she answers a question.

She can look at a place on the chalkboard behind you. Or suggest that she count to three before she responds to a question to allow time to take a deep breath. You might help her confront the thing that makes her most uncomfortable, such as reading aloud. Do this in steps, winning her confidence and cooperation.

Tip #5: Let her find her comfort zone.

If she resists speaking out in class, spend time with her after

class or during a break. Make sure she understands class discussions. Avoid putting her in uncomfortable situations, but let her know she is a vital part of the class.

Tip #6: Become the child's advocate.

Although she will not offer ideas during group sharing, you can do this for her. For example, you may say, "I know that Sarah's aunt went to the Holy Land last year. Isn't that right, Sarah?" Sarah can feel affirmed without

having to speak out. And in her own time she may offer to tell about the trip.

Tip #7: Avoid labeling.

To refer to one child as "my shy student" only makes the other students see the child in that light.

Tip #8: Seek help.

If the child is painfully shy, talk to the parents. Suggest professional help if you believe the shyness is a barricade to learning or developing relationships.

Questions For Further Study—

1. Which children in your children's ministry can you identify as shy?
2. What steps can be taken to address the shy child's learning needs?
3. What kind of relationship rapport do you and/or your ministry team have with the child's parents to reinforce each other's attempts to address the problem?