HELPING THE SHY CHILD

“I think that my child may be shy. I have always noticed that he is a little clingy when we are around new people: I thought that was because he was used to spending most of his time with me. He recently started preschool because I thought it would be good for him to learn and make some friends. All the other mothers stopped spending time in the classroom days ago. But, my son still seems to need me to be there.”

What does it mean to be a shy child?

Shy children tend to be uncomfortable or anxious in social situations, especially if they are in a new setting or are meeting people for the first time. For young children these feelings may be especially hard to manage when they want to participate but feel too anxious to join in the fun. Almost all grown-ups say they have felt shy at one time or another. We all know how uneasy these feelings can make us!

Why are some children shy?

There are several reasons that children may be shy. Some children are temperamentally shy. Remember that temperamental characteristics may be inborn. Mothers and fathers may notice from early infancy that their child is sensitive (e.g. crying, fussing, or irritability) to new toys, new people, and new places and needs extra time to adjust. These sensitive children may also be shy children. It is also often true that a shy parent will have a shy child. Finally, some children may be shy due to the culture in which they are raised, especially if children are praised for being "seen but not heard."

How can I tell if my child is shy?

Remember that all children experience stranger anxiety that begins at about 9 months and separation anxiety at about 18 months. For many children these worries fade away. For the shy child these worries persist beyond the second year; it is not something that they "grow out of." Mothers and fathers of shy children often describe their child as having difficulty making friends or as very clingy when meeting new people. Some parents feel that they are the only ones who are unable to leave their child at a birthday party. Other mothers and fathers may notice that their child mostly plays alone at their preschool, or even in a crowded playground.

How can I help my shy child?

- **Accept your child's shy temperament:** Introduce new people, places, and things gradually by going at the pace that your child can handle comfortably. It's important to reintroduce your child to these new people and places going steadily ahead without pushing your child on before they are ready. It's okay for your child to feel a little anxious or frustrated in these new situations. Talking about shy feelings before and after each new meeting can be really helpful. With your support your child will learn to cope with this special sensitivity.
- **Talk about teasing:** Other children will often tease a shy child because they can see that they are easily embarrassed. Your shy child may need extra hugs and encouragement. Reminders about all the
things your child can do well will help build confidence. Practice ways to interact with other kids. Remember not to tease your child about being shy.

- **Talk to teachers:** Let the teacher know that your child is shy. This will help her to focus on your child’s real needs for adult support. For example, a teacher may initially keep a shy child out of the spotlight by not calling on them in front of the whole class. Teachers are good ally’s because they are good at finding creative ways to help children shine. Hanging up the work of a shy child or finding a special role in the classroom may be especially meaningful. A shy child may be paired with a younger child that they can “tutor” or placed in small group settings that are easier to manage. Additionally the teacher may be able to find other children who can help her find ways to include a shy child.

- **Help your child make friends:** Ask your child's teacher if there is another child that might be a good friend for your child. Invite that child to your home for a short play date. At first, your child may feel more comfortable making friends in their own home. Inviting a younger child to your home to play can also help your child feel like a leader.

- **Prepare, prepare, prepare:** Anytime you know that a new experience is around the corner start preparing your child. This will help your child know what to expect. If your child is moving on from preschool to kindergarten, talk about it, read books about going to kindergarten, and most importantly visit the school, the classroom, and meet the teacher together.

- **Help your child get involved:** Finding that special hobby can be just the thing to get your child involved in new experiences and meeting new people. You may still need to go slow but shared interest may be just the ticket your child needs to make new friends.

- **Rehearsal is helpful:** Young children love to explore new roles in pretend play and do so often either alone or in a group. So rehearsing what it will be like to make a friend will come easily to your child. Let your child practice how to invite a child to play. Take on different roles. For example the grown-up can pretend to be the shy child.