Shyness, Ages 12 to 16

By Anne Krueger

Like quite a few parents, you may have recently taken a good look at your adolescent and wondered, "What happened?" Not only has your child's appearance changed, her demeanor may have as well. A once-gregarious child who used to tell you everything now clams up. A jolly child who was always surrounded by a dozen pals suddenly has no friends. Your previously confident child now blushes, stammers, and won't look anybody in the eye.

The multiple tempests of impending adulthood throw many kids for a loop. Weighing on their minds are such issues as changes in their bodies and how to respond to the opposite sex. They're worried about grades and fitting in. They may even be pondering the big "What am I going to do with my life?" question.

If your child was shy when she was younger, the pressures of middle and high school may make her withdraw even more. Even if she was outgoing, her confidence may falter. Stay tuned in to what's happening in your child's life, while allowing her a healthy degree of independence and autonomy. Here are answers to the many of the questions you probably have about your shy teen.

Why is my child suddenly shy?

The late-onset shyness you've noticed is likely a newfound self-consciousness. Children at this age develop what child psychologist David Elkind, author of Parenting Your Teenager, calls an "imaginary audience." They feel as though everyone is watching them, which makes them acutely aware of their actions and appearance.

If your child has abruptly become withdrawn, she may be going through a "hibernation" period to allow herself to think about all the things that are confusing her, from romance to academic pressures to peer relationships. During this phase, which typically is brief, your child may hide in her room, even when relatives or friends drop by. Unless she seems depressed, let her be, while making it clear that you're available to talk. Your child may eventually ask for guidance, or she may work things out on her own, emerging from her isolation when she's good and ready.

If your child has always been somewhat shy but has recently become dramatically so, that's likely a result of self-consciousness as well. During the teenage years, naturally quiet kids can become extremely anxious about participating in new activities or making new friends -- anything that puts them in the spotlight. If you can boost your child's confidence and help her have a few successes in the social arena, she'll forget about the audience and some of her shyness will likely disappear.

Most of the time, teenage shyness is a temporary phase and nothing to worry about. The child who has always been shy may struggle a bit more, but with support from her family she will probably come through the trials of adolescence a stronger person.

Why doesn't my child have any friends?

Childhood friendships often develop by chance: the child who lives next door is about your child's age, or she hooks up with someone who attends the same after-school program. Teens, however, are much more discriminating about friendships. Choosing someone and getting close may take some time.

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Your child may have discovered that she doesn’t have that much in common with the group she hangs out with. She may need to figure out where she fits in and what kind of friends she really wants. Or she may be a little less (or more) mature than her peer group — maybe she doesn’t want to read the same magazines or talk about who’s dating whom. If that’s the case, when she does form a friendship, it may be a particularly tight one with a similarly young-for-her-age child. Not to worry — they can be goofy together until their interests mature.

If your child is a natural introvert, she may be content to be less socially active than other children. This is not necessarily a bad thing: Many children go through junior high and high school with just a small group of friends or happily pursuing solo activities such as music and art. Don’t criticize your child’s choice of friends, even if she only has a couple or you think her friends are nerdy. So long as she’s happy, remind yourself that popularity isn’t really important.

**How can I help my shy child?**

Here are some approaches that may help your shy child feel better about herself and function better at school:

- Build her self-worth. Realizing that she has your confidence and trust — or even your admiration — will pump her ego up. Make sure she occasionally overhears you saying nice things about her personality, accomplishments, and activities to family members and friends.

- Don’t compare personalities. Accept that each member of a family has a slightly different temperament and her own way of dealing with the world. One child may be extremely social and another may be just as happy to have one or two close friends and spend more time at home.

- Practice social skills. If your child is having trouble making friends and wouldn’t mind some help, coach her on how to ask for and listen to other people’s opinions. Talk about the social situations that worry her most, and brainstorm ways she might make herself feel more comfortable. Don’t, however, turn into your child’s social director. Your interference will only signal that you lack faith in her.

- Don’t urge your child to change. Admonishments such as “Don’t be shy” or “Try to be more popular” aren’t going to do your child any good or be well received, since she’ll hear them as criticisms and can alter her behavior only so much. Remember, as much as you might wish it for your child, being popular is not a goal you want to dangle in front of her. If your child chooses to do things on her own, don’t make her feel inadequate. Many a loner has grown up to be a brilliant inventor or talented writer. Some children aren’t even lonely when they’re alone. They may be shy, but they still like themselves.

- Praise your child’s strengths. A shy teen may not be comfortable enough to run for student council, but she might win a prize in the school science contest or be an excellent artist.

**When should I be worried about my shy child?**

Most shy teens do just fine in high school and don’t seem to mind that they’re not the homecoming king or captain of the basketball team. If you’re supportive and appreciative of your child’s successes and friendships, she’ll learn to see her shyness as a little quirk, not a major character flaw.

But sometimes shyness spirals into feelings of loneliness or failure. If your child feels like an outcast or worries that she’s letting her family down, her self-esteem may take a nose-dive. Here are some danger signs to watch out for:

- Unhealthy habits. If your child has suffered rejection, she may give up on group activities or social functions and fill her solitary hours by eating, watching TV, playing video games, or surfing the Internet.

- Friends only with family. Being close with your parents is a good thing, but if your child wants to hang with Mom and Dad or her siblings all the time, she’s not developing the interpersonal skills she’ll need to build friendships and even work relationships as an adult.

- Bad bonding. If your shy child also has low self-esteem, problems can arise if she gravitates toward a child with similar problems. Two adolescents who view themselves as “losers” or “outcasts” may get some destructive ideas about how to escape reality (drugs, drinking) or retaliate against people they feel have wronged them.

- Defensively rejecting others. If your child is extremely shy or has been rebuffed by some not-so-nice children, she may get in the habit of declining friendships as an act of self-protection. She may have decided that it’s better to shun other kids and be friendless than be considered a social failure.

**Where can I get help?**

If your child’s behavior worries you, particularly if she begins to do or say things that seem out of character, it’s time to take action. You need not only to provide loving support but to call in the experts. Your first step could be to call your child’s school guidance counselor or...
your child's doctor. Either of these professionals can offer advice and put you in touch with specialists, support networks, and health facilities. You can also look online or in the yellow pages of your phone book under family, child and individual counselors or psychologists or in the government listings pages under: Mental Health Department (state or municipal), Health Services Department, or Education Department (look for "Guidance" or "Social Worker").

Two excellent books on the issues facing adolescents are: Parenting Your Teenager, by child psychologist David Elkind, and The Ten Most Troublesome Teen-Age Problems, by psychologist Lawrence Bauman. In addition to providing useful insights and tips, these books may help you realize that you're not alone in the difficulties you face with your child during these challenging years.

Further Resources

For more information on shyness and other worrisome behavior in adolescents, contact:

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
(202) 966-7300
http://www.aacap.org/ce/root/facts_for_families/facts_for_families

The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
(703) 838-9808
http://www.aamft.org

The American Counseling Association
(800) 347-6647
http://www.counseling.org

Free Spirit Publishing
http://www.freespirit.com
Free Spirit Publishing is a publisher of nonfiction self-help resources for kids, teachers, and parents. The site includes questions by kids and answers by experts about issues such as privacy, teasing, and dealing with bullies.

References


Bracelet, T. Berry, MD, and Joshua D. Sparrow, MD. Touchpoints Birth to Three: Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development. 2006. Da Capo Press.

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