

Dr. Oz



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Charms of the Quiet Child

Big personalities may get the applause, but reserve can be a gift, and a little shyness can be O.K.

MOST PARENTS WANT THEIR children to be assertive, bold and brave, to take on challenges without fear of people or of failure. Some kids do just that, and when they do, the grownups swoon. This is how Presidents, movie stars and Olympic medalists start out, isn't it? Who wouldn't want a golden child? The problem, of course, is that if boldness is golden, reticence must be silver or bronze—or tin. Introverted children are everywhere—you may be raising one—yet too often they wind up without cheerleaders.

So for starters, let's remember that introversion, in most cases, is good. The accomplishments of deep thinkers, great poets, world-changing scientists stack up quite nicely against those of Oscar winners and Olympians, even if there's not the same temperamental sizzle to go along with them. Jonas Salk and Marie Curie did not spend a lot of time in the club scene. Neil Armstrong is no one's idea of a glad-hander. But the fact is, they, like thousands of history's other greats, might never have achieved the things they did without their quiet focus.

The key for parents raising introverted children is first and most important to accept that vast personality differences exist among all kids, even when they grow up

under the same roof with the same parents. My four children are incredibly different, as is the case with my siblings and me. But just because our kids present entirely different faces to us doesn't mean they should get entirely different responses. It may be easier to react with enthusiasm and applause (often literally) to a child who is an athlete or a dancer than to one whose gifts lie in math and science. And it's certainly easier to be charmed by your funnier, more charismatic kids than by your quieter, more taciturn ones. But rewarding your children's diverse skills and styles with equal support is important all the same.

Genuine maladaptive shyness, of course, is not at all

the same as simple, healthy introversion—and it has very different causes and consequences. Left unaddressed, extreme shyness can hinder language and other kinds of cognitive development. It may also lead to depression, low self-esteem and simple loneliness. While healthy introversion is likely innate, shyness can be heavily influenced by environment. Dynamics in the home that can drive a child inward include abuse, trauma and alcoholism. Birth order, a bullying older sibling and flagrant favoritism by parents can contribute as well.

There may be physical causes of shyness too. In my specialty, I sometimes see heart ailments that make a child more introverted. If blood isn't circulating properly, the brain and other organs don't get enough oxygen for engagement in social interactions. Speech and hearing need to be assessed as well; if you can't hear or communicate properly, you

can hardly engage with the people around you easily or well. A pediatric neurologist can determine if a child's shyness is actually a condition lying on the autism spectrum, and a psychologist can look for anxiety conditions such as social phobia and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Treatments for anxiety conditions in particular can be very straightforward, including exposure to feared situations (immersion), either through real experiences or imagined desensitization. Group therapy may be especially valuable for kids whose issue involves learning to be comfortable with others. In truly stubborn cases, some anti-anxiety medications are approved for pediatric use, but they should be reserved for the kids who are most at risk.

The best wisdom I can offer I learned on the job—not as a doctor but as a parent. As dangerous as the consequences of shyness can be for development, the dangers of parents' imposing some ideal vision of childhood behavior on their kids are more insidious. All children have their own lens through which they view the world. If that lens refracts things in the softer, quieter focus of the introvert, parents must accept that. The occasional social nudge is fine for a withdrawn or timid child. But a full, unreserved embrace is better still. ■

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