

Cognitive therapy. The client learns how to identify and change unproductive thought patterns by observing his or her feelings and learning to separate realistic thoughts from unrealistic ones. Most experts agree that this type of therapy is the most effective one in treating social anxiety.

Group therapy. People with social anxiety benefit from being in an ongoing therapy group with other clients who also have the disorder. The best type of group is one in which the focus is learning new skills and overcoming the isolation that people with this disorder feel.

Relaxation training. Many people with social anxiety disorders benefit from self-hypnosis, guided visualization, and biofeedback. Relaxation training is often part of psychotherapy.

Medication. Antidepressant and anti-anxiety medications can help reverse chemical imbalances that cause symptoms of social anxiety. This is an effective treatment for many people, especially in combination with psychotherapy.

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Anxiety in Children

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Positive Reinforcement (for Parents)

When Kids Don't Want to Go to School

Social Anxiety Disorder (Shyness)

WHAT IS SOCIAL ANXIETY?

Social anxiety or social phobia (shyness) is the fear of being around other people. Children who suffer from this disorder are extremely apprehensive in social situations and may have tantrums and cling to their caregivers. Most of these children want to be able to interact with others but are unable to do so, freezing up and becoming withdrawn.

Older children and teens with social anxiety always feel uncomfortable and self-conscious around others. They may have the feeling that everyone is constantly staring at them and being critical in some way. Because the anxiety is so painful, they learn to stay away from social situations and avoid other people. Some eventually need to be alone at all times, in a room with the door closed. The feeling is pervasive and constant, and it even happens with people they know.

Small children with social anxiety become very upset when in unfamiliar social situations. They may experience a sense of intense fear, along with

WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Social Phobia/Social Anxiety Association
(www.socialphobia.org).

Burns, David. *Ten Days to Self-Esteem*. New York: William Morrow, 1993.

Zimbardo, P. *Shyness: What It Is and What to Do About It*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987.

Books for Kids:

Best, Cari. *Shrinking Violet*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2001.

Lovell, Patty. *Stand Tall, Molly Lou Melon*. New York: Putnam, 2001

Raschka, Chris. *The Blushful Hippopotamus*. London, England: Orchard, 1996.



shaking, rapid heartbeat, blushing, dry mouth, difficulty in swallowing, and other symptoms of extreme nervousness. The prevailing feeling is intense, overwhelming anxiety. Most sufferers realize that their feelings are irrational, but this does not help relieve them.

Help your child accept being shy. If you speak of shyness as a normal and acceptable way of being, your child will learn to accept it.

Social anxiety or shyness may be caused by any combination of the following factors:

- The child has a genetic predisposition to shyness. Many personality factors are inherited. On a continuum from introverted to extraverted, the child may be naturally shy.
- The attachment between the child and his or her parents is weak at best.
- The child has not learned adequate social skills.
- The child has been criticized and teased by family members and has learned that it is punishing to express him- or herself.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO HELP THE SOCIALLY ANXIOUS CHILD?

Shyness can be extremely painful for a child, teen, or adult. Parents can help shy children be more comfortable around people by trying a few of the following ideas.

Don't refer to your child as "shy." When you give a child a label, he or she may feel stuck with this identity and hopeless about learning different behaviors.

- Be empathic when your child is fearful around others. For example, if your child is afraid to go to a friend's house, you could say, "You seem to be feeling a little upset about this. It's okay to feel that way. I used to be a bit nervous about going to someone's house, too."
- Help your child accept being shy. If you speak of shyness as a normal and acceptable way of being, your child will learn to accept it. Tell your child about times when you felt shy and what you did to cope with it.
- Talk about learning some new behaviors, and help your child learn them. If you want your child to learn to be more outgoing, be outgoing yourself.
- Gradually introduce your child to new situations. Take small steps and talk about them before they happen. After each step, talk to your child about what happened.
- Set small and manageable goals—things like making eye contact and saying one word during a conversation. When your child learns the new behavior, give plenty of praise and acknowledge how challenging it was.
- Describe the value of learning to be more outgoing. Give your child some reasons to learn to overcome his or shyness, such as having more friends and enjoying school more.
- Don't refer to your child as "shy." When you give a child a label, he or she may feel stuck with this identity and hopeless about learning different behaviors.
- When you and your child are together and encounter an outgoing person, talk about it afterward. Point out the outgoing behaviors without making a comparison to your child.
- Provide opportunities for your child to work on an activity with one other child.
- Read books to your young child about shy children who learn to be more outgoing. See the list at the end of this handout for a few recommendations.
- Protect your child from being teased by other kids.

- Talk to your child about feelings and show him or her how to express them. When your child is feeling afraid or self-conscious, help him or her to describe the feelings and put them into words. Talk about your own feelings. Such discussions help normalize these emotions and make the child feel less isolated.
- Ask other adults for their help. Explain what you are doing with your child and ask them to help in specific ways.
- Seek the assistance of a mental health professional. Sometimes parents need help with helping their children. If you try the ideas on this list and believe your child needs more than you can offer, ask your family doctor for a referral to a licensed mental health professional who specializes in working with kids.

WHAT KIND OF PROFESSIONAL TREATMENT HELPS SHY KIDS?

Most people who suffer from anxiety disorders begin to feel better when they receive the proper treatment. It can be difficult to identify the correct treatment, however, because each person's anxiety is caused by a unique set of factors. It can be frustrating for the client when treatment is not immediately successful or takes longer than hoped for. Many clients feel better after a few weeks or months of treatment. If a person has an anxiety disorder in combination with another disorder (such as depression), treatment is more complicated and takes longer.

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Although a treatment plan must be specifically designed for each individual, a number of standard approaches exist. Mental health professionals who specialize in treating anxiety most often use a combination of the following treatments (there is no single correct approach):