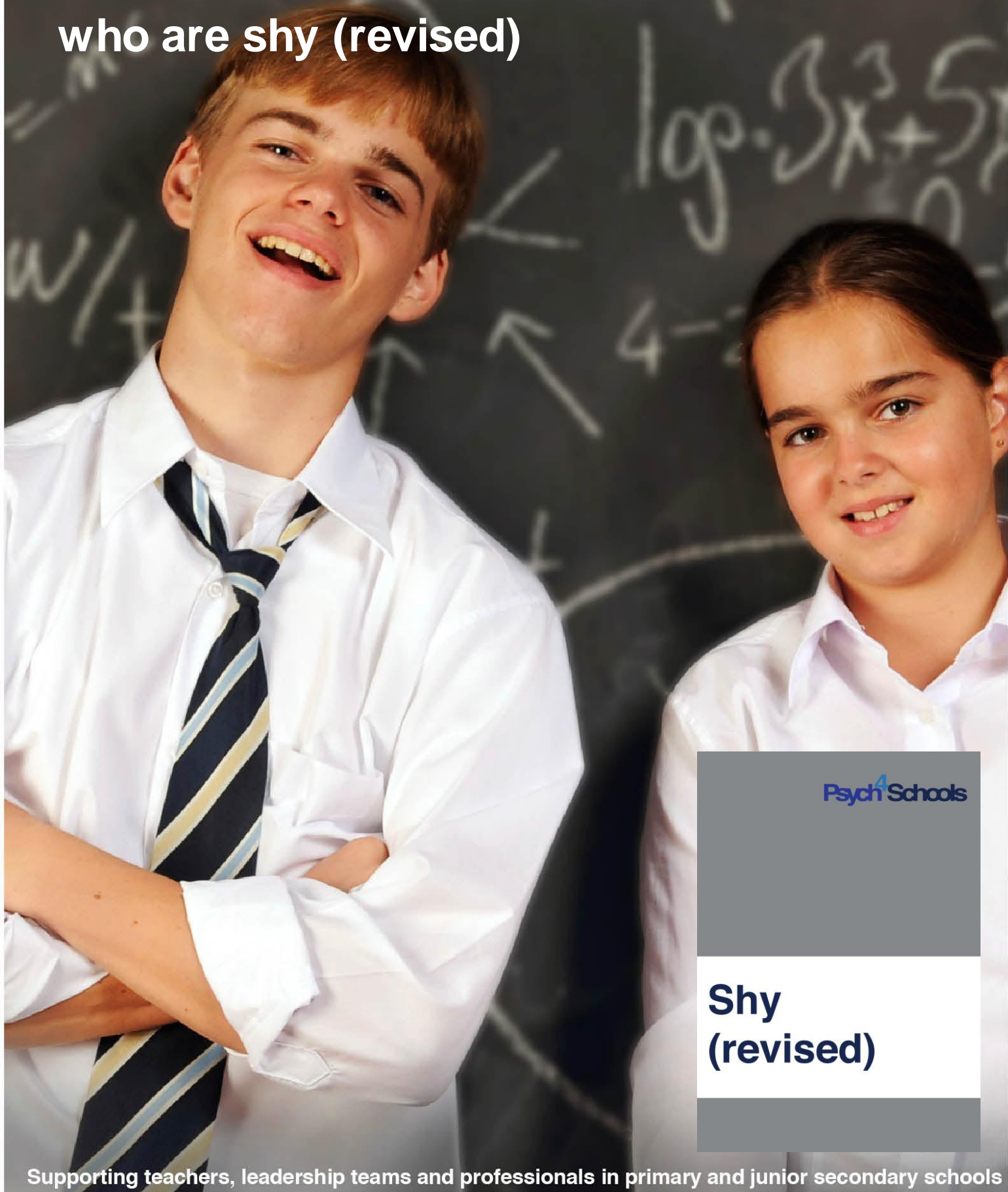# Working with
children
who are shy (revised)

Psych4Schools

**Shy
(revised)**

Supporting teachers, leadership teams and professionals in primary and junior secondary schools

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Children who are shy

Feeling shy can be a normal part of a child or young person's life, especially when new people or situations are encountered. However, shyness becomes a concern when it occurs in most situations and interactions, and interferes with relationships and schoolwork, or if the child is frequently nervous, socially anxious or withdrawn.

At school, children who are shy might:

- display low levels of confidence

- have a quiet, softly spoken voice

- avoid or resist speaking and participating in social situations

- say as few words as possible

- display self-consciousness or nervous behaviours indicating discomfort in the presence of others, such as, lip biting, swallowing, hand wringing, trembling or a changed breathing pattern

- avoid eye contact and look away when spoken to

- hover near a group of children without joining in

- have difficulty initiating or joining in a game, even when they have been asked

- show interest in what's going on, but prefer to watch from the sidelines

- avoid drawing attention to themselves, preferring not to be noticed

- follow instructions but prefer not to respond verbally.

Why are children shy?

There are a variety of reasons why children might be shy. Shyness may be a personality trait, forming part of the child's temperament. That is, some children are born with a biological predisposition to being shy and feeling uncomfortable in novel situations.

In addition, it may arise from:

- experiencing a new situation or meeting a new person

- feeling uncomfortable at home, at school or in other social situations

- not fully separating from a parent

- living with a shy, anxious or overbearing parent

- in some cases, shyness, may be partly attributable to a previous trauma.

Why might shyness be a problem?

There is nothing inherently wrong with children being shy and reserved in some social situations. However, shyness is a type of communication anxiety. Shy children tend to spend less time in social situations and therefore less time learning from their peers.

The shy child would prefer to join in with peers, but fears negative judgment. They often worry about being nervous when interacting with others, because they doubt themselves and their level of skill or confidence. This reduces the child's coping strategies and resilience. Shyness in childhood can predict later anxiety,[1] including other social emotional issues, in adolescence and adulthood.

Shyness may be perceived by others as unfriendliness and can lead to misunderstandings and social problems in peer groups. Sometimes shy children can be rejected by the peer group because of their lack of involvement. This can have negative effects on the child's self-esteem. They can then become targets for bullying.

It is important to rule out other possible causes of a child's shy behaviour, for example, vision or hearing loss or speech delay. Discussion with parents and previous teachers is important in excluding these possibilities.

Caution

Where shy behaviours are believed to be associated with depression, selective mutism, or autism, the teacher should discuss their observations and concerns with an assistant or deputy principal or wellbeing teacher, and parents for consideration in planning further action.

Teachers should refrain from saying a child's shyness may be associated with a specific condition, unless this diagnosis has been substantiated by a psychologist, another allied health professional or medical specialist.

When to seek further assistance

When shyness is impeding adversely on a child's social interactions, emotional development or schoolwork, professional help from a psychologist might be required. Parental consent will be required for such referrals. However, there are many strategies teachers can use in the classroom to help a child to become more confident and to reduce anxiety related to shyness.

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[1] Hudson, J., Anxiety Disorders in Children: Aetiology, Assessment and Treatment. Keynote Address, Anxiety in Children. Royal Children's Hospital Psychology Seminar, Melbourne, July 2009.

Strategies to support the child who is shy

- **Never call a child 'shy'.** The label can become internalised, typically leading to increased withdrawal. Ensure others do not label or tease the child—deal with this if it occurs. Remember that ongoing teasing, either intermittent or frequent, may constitute bullying.

- **Be thoughtful about your relationship with the child**. Show empathy, warmth and understanding when engaging with the child.

- **Build a trusting relationship.** Spend several minutes daily talking privately with the child. Display empathy and identify and name feelings, 'This might be a bit scary for you, but you are in a safe, friendly class.' Be friendly and open. Tell the child about a time you felt nervous, such as starting school, making new friends or speaking in public. Explain how it felt and how you overcame the feelings, such as telling yourself that shy feelings will eventually fade.

Liaise with parents

- **Talk with parents regularly about strategies being implemented in the classroom** to encourage social engagement. Encourage parents to implement relevant strategies at home.

- **Plan smooth transitions with parents.** Reduce the preschool or pre-secondary school child's anxiety through transition programs. These could include short school and classroom visits, and watching school performances or other events prior to starting at the new school. Encourage parents to take their preschool child to the school playground for short play times prior to beginning the following year. Suggest that inviting another preschooler can also beneficial.

Build communication confidence

- **Sit the child near socially aware, friendly and caring peers** to help build confidence.

- **Assist children to manage teasing**. Give them words to use. For example, 'Teasing is not nice. I don't like it when you tease. Please stop…' Encourage children to seek adult support if needed. Adopt a no tolerance policy on bullying, and be prepared to intervene.

- **Engage in conversations that draw on the child's interests** or something they feel confident about such as sport, television shows, books or dancing, then invite other kind students to join the conversations.

- **Reward attempts at communication**. Don't point out where they have gone wrong or are unclear, rather reinforce and support their attempts to communicate with others.

- **Minimise the risk of embarrassment when speaking publicly.** In whole-class situations, only ask questions you know the child will be able to answer. Prepare the child—tell them in advance when it will be their turn to speak, present or answer a question. To build confidence have the child practise with you or another adult before they speak to the whole class.

- **Avoid situations where the shy child is required to read aloud or is under pressure to respond to a question** they are clearly unable to answer. Communication anxiety is heightened when children are made to squirm in such situations.

- **Praise confident behaviour immediately.** When a child has taken a risk, such as answering a question, or saying 'hello' to you or a friend, provide specific and immediate feedback. Label the behaviour you are praising. Rather than 'good girl', say, 'I like the way you used eye contact when you spoke to me' or 'You spoke with confidence today Liz. Well done.'

- **Use pairs or small group work.** Select peers who will encourage the child to interact with classmates. Young children can hold hands when walking or older children can play a game in a small group. When talking and working in a small group, the 'pair-share strategy', which uses a buddy or peer support approach, can be helpful. You could set up pen- or email-pals between pairs of students across two classes.

- **Use puppets or soft toys.** Some young children will be more confident speaking via a puppet or toy. These can be used during circle time, or the class can use them when working in small groups to develop stories or plays.

- **Assign a role that encourages interactions with others without being threatening.** For example, during circle-time or class discussions, the child can give out materials such as cards with sentence stems designed to build social skills, or be responsible for passing the soft toy to the next speaker. Access the *Psych4schools Social Skills Dice* for some sentence starters.

Assist learning of social skills

- **Introduce the themes of kindness and respect for others to your class**. These are key determinants of peer acceptance. For activity ideas and free lesson plans see *the Random acts of kindness foundation* website. Challenge the class to initiate at least one act of kindness towards a person at school and at home each week. Acts of kindness at home could be established from the beginning of the year or beginning of term as a weekly 'homework' task.

- **Use interests to assist in developing social skills and confidence.** Talk to the child's parents and previous teacher about special interests and strengths and what works well in terms of specific learning situations. For example, if the child is proficient on the computer ask them to support another student for several minutes once a week. If they are capable in cartooning, design, or general artwork, display their work for others to comment on and see.

- **Do not 'mollycoddle' the child. Assist them to meet social goals**. Indulgent care or pampering to every need will reinforce shy behaviour. For example, rather than allowing them to stay inside during break times to ease their nervousness regarding outdoor playtime, assist them to learn how to greet others, the rules of playground games, and to use friendly, but assertive play requests. Discuss how to join in games such as skipping or four square by simply standing in line, generally not having to say much more than, 'I'd like to play too'.

- **Teach strategies to help them initiate play or take part in social interactions**, if required.

  - **Encourage the child to use non-verbal gestures,** such as waving to you each morning and at the end of the day, or using 'high-five' or 'thumbs up' during the day.

  - **Have the child ask questions to gather information for you** such as, 'Andrew, can you please ask Toby when his birthday is for our birthday chart' or 'Van, can you please ask Ms. Taylor the netball numbers for this afternoon's sport practice.'

  - **Explicitly teach the child to use eye contact and the person's name when speaking with them.** Explain that this is important because it shows the other person you are interested in and listening to what they are saying. Teach the child to nod or smile if they agree or like what the person is saying.

- **Role-play social situations** such as how to ask about joining in a game or how to handle rejection in an appropriate way. Give the child specific sentences such as, 'Can I play too?' To help them handle rejection, provide alternatives such as, 'Is it okay, if I watch the first game? Can I please play in the next game?' Practice with the child.

- **Set up safe risk-taking social behaviours** such as delivering a message or book to another teacher, or handing out lunch orders or materials to class members. Increase the level of interaction, novel situations or new people gradually, as the child exhibits greater confidence.

- **Provide objects to facilitate playground interactions.** For example, give the child a tennis ball, long skipping rope, tennis ball and two bats, small box of coloured chalk or a basketball to take out at lunchtime to encourage others to join them.

- **Encourage the child to challenge themselves** to play games that are outside their 'comfort' zone. Insist they persist with the new game for several weeks, rather than giving up on the first setback.

- **If appropriate, read stories about children who are shy** and talk about the strengths and strategies used to combat shyness. The website *shykids* has materials and books grouped by age to read and discuss.

Confidence ladder for the younger child

- **Develop an individualised step-by-step skills ladder** for building confidence and reducing shyness. Below is an example of a skills ladder teachers can systematically use to help build the confidence of the primary-aged child at school. Recognise small steps. For older children see the skills ladder on page 9.

Step	Behaviour	Date achieved
1	Makes eye contact with others	
2	Waves and smiles at others	
3	Uses 'high-five' or 'thumbs up' signs	
4	Says 'hello', 'thank-you' and 'good morning' to teacher	
5	Speaks with one or two classmates	
6	Completes teacher errands with a partner	
7	Speaks in a group of four classmates	
8	Speaks in circle time or in class discussion time	
9	Answers a question in class	
10	Presents an oral presentation to the class	

Strategies for the older child

- **Normalise feelings of nervousness and awkwardness when meeting new people, speaking to a group or starting something new.** Talk with the whole class about how most adults and children feel nervous and self-conscious when starting something new. A good time to do this is the beginning of the year, or when assigning an oral presentation to the class. Ask more confident children to give examples of times they have felt like this and what they did to overcome it, or to perform despite feeling nervous.

- **Give the child a leadership role with younger students.** For example, a Year 5 student could read a story to a junior class with a partner, or be a buddy for a Year 1 student.

- **Set achievable and safe risk-taking goals.** Brainstorm and record up to three specific goals with the child such as, 'volunteer to read aloud in a group once a week'. Monitor progress, discuss regularly and adapt goals as the child exhibits greater confidence. Praise success and make suggestions for continued improvement using specific, clear feedback.

- **Read picture books, novels, newspaper or magazine articles and view films as a class.** Select titles that highlight strategies used by a child or adult to overcome fears or become more outgoing.

- **Encourage the child to engage in extra-curricular activities.** Talk with the child and/or their parents about areas of interest, and explore activities or clubs they can join. Extra-curricular activities can help shy children build confidence in their own abilities, and provide opportunities to practise social skills with children who share the same interests. If the child is reluctant, discuss and normalise feelings of nervousness and awkwardness before they start, and continue to encourage them to attend until they feel confident.

- **Encourage the child to practise saying hello and greeting other people to build confidence.** Talk with the child privately. Normalise any feelings of awkwardness. You may suggest they practise saying hello to themselves in the mirror at home, or with a close friend or family member. If practising in the mirror have them notice how they look saying hello using different facial expressions, looking themselves in the eye, looking away, or looking out from underneath their fringe etc. Remind them to smile, look the other person in the eye (or themselves if it is in the mirror), and ask one or two questions.

Confidence ladder for an older child

- **Develop an individualised step-by-step skills ladder** for building confidence and reducing shyness. Following is a skills ladder teachers can systematically use to help build the older primary and junior secondary child's confidence at school.

  The child can be encouraged to talk about their shyness or communication anxiety as part of a plan to build self-confidence. They can rate social and classroom situations where they feel shy on a 10-point scale from extreme discomfort to comfortable. They can choose the behaviours they want to work on. Behaviours can be ticked off when they have been successfully achieved.

Step	Behaviour	Date achieved
1	Acknowledge and say' hello' to one other student	
2	Acknowledge and say 'hello' to two or three other students	
3	Engage in 'small talk' with one or two other students before class	
4	Seek out a specific person to sit with in class	
5	Speak to two others at breaks	
6	Do an act of kindness, or volunteer to help a teacher or other adult	
7	Ask a teacher a question or tell the teacher two facts about research being done on a school camp, a sports team or similar agreed task	
8	Become involved in a game or visit the library with a friend	
9	Walk around the entire school with at least one friend	
10	Participate in small-group or class discussions	
11	Go to an after-school activity or social event at school	
12	Go to a school camp or join a club or sporting team	

Resources

Psych4Schools ebooklets

Excerpts available in the *Free Resources section of the Psych4Schools website*.

- Working with children who are anxious

- Working with children who worry excessively

- Working with children who are selectively mute

- Working with children who fear speaking publically

Complete ebooklets available to *Psych4Schools members in the Member Area.*

Websites

- Shy Kids *www.shykids.com/*

- Shyness in the classroom … Shake your Shyness
  www.shakeyourshyness.com/teachingshychildren.htm

- Shyness research institute *www.ius.edu/shyness/index.php*

Books for parents and teachers

- Brozovich, R. & Chase, L. (2008). Say goodbye to being shy: A workbook to help kids overcome shyness. Instant Help: USA.

- Carducci, B. (2003). The shyness breakthrough: A no-stress plan to help your shy child warm up, open up, and join the fun. Rondale Books: USA

Books for children

- Freeland, C. (2016). What to do when you feel too shy. Magination Press:

Picture Story books

- Bracken, B. (2012). Too shy for show and tell, Picture Window Books, USA.

- Freedman, D. (2016). Shy. Viking books for young readers, USA.

- Mack, D. (2007). The shy creatures. Fiewel and Friends, NY, USA