

## **Differences from Birth: Responding to the Temperamentally Slow-to-Warm-Up or Shy Child Part II**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

I received a number of e-mails from readers about my February column that described the ways in which the inborn temperament of children plays a large role both in their development and how the adults in their lives respond to them. Although most of the correspondence I received focused on the parent-child relationship, other writers emphasized the importance of appreciating temperamental differences in any relationship, including teacher-student, husband-wife, employer-employee, co-workers, and friends. As I have found during my workshops when I discuss temperament, the topic triggers much thought.

In last month's column I reviewed the work of two of the pioneers in the field of examining differences in infant temperament, psychiatrists Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas. They and their colleagues studied many infants and identified nine characteristics of temperament. Based upon these characteristics they labeled three kinds of infants, the "easy" child; the "slow-to-warm-up," cautious, or shy child; and the "difficult" child. They noted that these were not precise labels since a number of youngsters do not fit neatly into any of these three groups while others appear to possess qualities from more than one group. Although the labels may lack some precision, I believe it is important for parents, teachers, and other adults to recognize that there are differences in children from birth and that one's response to children should be based in part on awareness of their inborn characteristics.

Much of the correspondence I received after my last column concerned "slow-to-warm-up" and "difficult" children rather than "easy" children. This was not surprising; I have found that if a child has an "easy" temperament, which implies they are easier to raise and educate, then parents and teachers typically have fewer questions about responding to them. In this month's column I will describe several guidelines for interacting with "slow-to-warm-up" or shy children, while next month's column will be devoted to the challenges of raising and educating the "difficult" child. Let's examine several of these guidelines.

1. Perhaps one of the most important guidelines is to become as knowledgeable as possible about temperamental differences in children. Although there has been much research in the area of temperament, I believe that this research has not been disseminated to the public to the extent that it should, especially in terms of the

significant impact that temperament may have on a child's development and an adult's reaction to the child. As one example, while some parents and educators are quite knowledgeable about temperamental differences in children, even stating, "I know each child is different from birth," they are also apt to say, "I treat each child the same since that is the fair thing to do." However, if children are different from birth then fairness should not be equated with treating all children the same but rather treating them differently based on their unique needs.

2. We must learn to accept our children for who they are and not just what we want them to be. Shy children are not being shy on purpose. As a matter of fact, based on my work with many shy youngsters (and adults), I know that they often experience a great deal of pain and embarrassment because of their cautious nature and would love to be more outgoing and gregarious. Accepting children for who they are does not imply that we refrain from assisting them to modify those features of their temperament that are causing them (and the adults in their lives) distress, but rather that our assistance must be undertaken in an empathic, caring way. Parents and other adults must take the first steps to accommodate to the child's style and not expect the child to accommodate to ours. There is a concept in the field of child development labeled "goodness-of-fit" that captures this accommodation. "Goodness-of-fit" occurs when there is congruence between the expectations of parents and the child's temperament, interests, and abilities.

In my last column I offered an example of a poor fit between a six-year-old shy child and her mother. This mother's anxiety prompted her to ask her daughter each day after school, "Did you speak to other kids today?" This question served only to increase this young child's anxiety. Not only was this girl upset that she had difficulty making friends but also because of the disappointment she believed she was causing her mother.

3. Instead of exhorting cautious, shy youngsters to speak up or look people in the eye, we must be empathic and communicate that we understand their plight, that we are available to help, and that there is hope for improvement. For example, I have often recommended to parents that they say to their shy child, "We know it's not easy for you to say hello to people. It's not easy for a lot of kids. But maybe together we can figure out what will make it easier because many kids who have trouble saying hello and speaking to other people when they are young find it less difficult to do as they get older."

I have seen the face of children light up when they hear this seemingly simple statement from their parents. If we look closely at the components of this comment we realize why it is so powerful. It is filled with empathy ("We know it's not easy for you to say hello to other people"), it normalizes the situation ("It's not easy for a lot of kids"), it

emphasizes we are available to help (“Maybe together we can figure out what will make it easier”), and it offers realistic hope (“Many kids who have trouble saying hello and speaking to other people when they are young find it less difficult to do as they get older”).

4. Once we have suggested to our children that there may be ways of improving their situation, we can engage them in becoming active participants in the process of arriving at realistic solutions to help them to be less withdrawn. For example, one six-year-old boy who had difficulty greeting people he did not know told his parents that he thought he would be able to say at least one word, “hi.” His parents responded that was a “really good idea” and a “really good start.” After a short time of saying “hi” and a few other words, this boy became more comfortable engaging in longer conversations. It may be difficult with some children to figure out even a small step that would help their shyness, but it has been my experience that if children feel you are not criticizing them, that you understand how they feel, and that you are genuinely joining their journey to find a solution, the solution will be discovered more quickly.

5. Especially with younger children, adults may have to engage in what I call “environmental engineering” (I first began to use this term when my sons went to a summer camp that had a position called “environmental engineers.” It was a position that was the stepping stone to becoming a counselor. Although the title had a sophisticated sounding name, environmental engineers were basically in charge of cleaning up the camp. I liked the name but gave it a different meaning in my work). Environmental engineering involves both behind the scenes as well as direct work that we do at times to create opportunities for our children to experience success. I recall a mother of a seven-year-old shy girl who called her friend who also had a seven-year-old to arrange a get-together. Once the arrangements were made, this mother took the girls to a movie and then for some ice cream, activities that did not require much talking, but allowed her daughter positive contact with another child.

Basically, as parents we must provide our children with social interactions that have a high probability of success. Each success will serve to enhance our children’s self-confidence in their contact with others.

6. Don’t embarrass or allow others to embarrass your child. The typical reaction of shy and cautious children when approached by people they do not know is to hide behind their parents or leave the scene. Some parents in front of other people will whisper angrily to their child, “Why can’t you say hello, why must you always embarrass me?” In these instances, the other people usually hear what is being said and the child becomes even more self-conscious. Some parents wishing not to embarrass their child use the

following technique, but the results are often further humiliation and hurt. They say to the other people, “My child is s-h-y, that’s why he’s not t-a-l-k-i-n-g to you.” The child may not spell yet but knows something is not right.

If another person greets your child and then, in response to your child not answering, utters an insensitive comment such as, “Oh, he’s shy” or “Oh, he doesn’t like to talk” or “Come on, you can say hello to me,” I believe we should say to this person, “My son (or daughter) is a wonderful child, but sometimes takes a little longer to say hello until he (or she) gets to know you.” All of us would like our children to be socially adept and comfortable at a very early age, but if they are temperamentally shy, it will not help to criticize them. What they need to know is that we love and support them even as they struggle to be more outgoing.

The same guidelines pertain to school. One of the most anxious moments for a shy child is to be called on by the teacher. In my workshops I half-kiddingly say that one does not have to be shy to become anxious when called upon. I often ask the audience what would happen if I began to call on them. Would they shout, “This is wonderful, I haven’t been called on in 15 years. What an unexpected surprise. Please call on me, Bob!”? Their laughter often suggests the anxiety that would occur should I call upon them.

Given the high anxiety associated with being called upon, what can teachers do for a shy child in school? At one of my workshops for educators someone suggested that perhaps the safest approach is not call on such a child. However, if the child is never called upon then that child will never gain experiences speaking in class. One teacher’s solution was to engage in what I would call “proactive environmental engineering.” On the first day of school she directly introduced the topic that most students don’t like to be called on and asked the class for possible reasons. Responses included that they were afraid to make a mistake, that they were afraid if they made mistakes other kids would make fun of them, and that some kids didn’t like to talk. She then discussed the reasons she called on students and posed as a question what she might do as a teacher and what they might do as a class to minimize worries about being called upon. The very act of discussing this topic lessened the anxiety of the students about being called on in class.

Some teachers I know have used another form of “proactive environmental engineering” by actually informing students a day in advance of what questions they would ask the next day. While some might argue that this would make students more anxious as they contemplated being called upon the following day, I have heard the opposite from teachers, namely, if they select questions that are within the child’s level of expertise, there is less worry about being called upon. One teacher said that it was

similar to “desensitizing” a shy child to a social situation. Educators who do this recognize that most children who are shy or cautious would love to feel more comfortable being an active participant in the classroom.

As is evident from these various guidelines, one must recognize that there are a number of children who are born slow-to-warm-up or shy. This may be manifested in various ways. In this column I have focused on the issue of shyness in social situations, although children may demonstrate cautiousness in other situations as well (e.g., attempting a new sporting activity). I have also described children whose shyness is not so extreme as to be totally debilitating. However, there are children for whom shyness is so intense that it falls within the umbrella of a “social phobia” and represents a severe form of temperamental shyness, one that is often accompanied by panic attacks when in social situations. If your child suffers from this more extreme form, a consultation with a mental health professional who specializes in children and adolescents is indicated.

It is important to remember that while children may be born “slow-to-warm-up” or shy, if we accommodate to their style and develop a “goodness-of-fit” between our expectations and behaviors and their temperament, we can create an environment that will allow them to grow and develop. The alternative is to raise children who feel unaccepted, who believe love is conditional and based upon their behavior, who feel they have disappointed their parents, and who often experience a diminishing of self-esteem and confidence. Given this alternative, we should have as a top priority the nurturance of a goodness-of-fit in our relationship with our children. In next month’s column I will examine the challenge of developing a goodness-of-fit when the child has a “difficult” temperament.

**<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>**