

SHYNESS VERSUS SOCIAL ANXIETY IN CHILDREN

It is only natural to feel self-conscious, shy or nervous in front of other people at times. Anyone may experience a racing heart, sweaty palms or a fluttering stomach when they are in performance situations, such as trying out for a sports team, or giving a class presentation. Most people manage to get through these moments when they need to, but for some, the anxiety that accompanies feeling shy or self-conscious can be extreme. For these individuals, the experience may seem so unbearable that they feel too nervous to provide answers in class, are unable to make eye contact with their classmates in the hallway, or avoid talking to others during break. When children feel so self-conscious and anxious that it prevents them from speaking up, or socializing, on a regular basis, it is probably more than shyness. These children may be experiencing symptoms of a condition called Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)¹.

The difference between normal worry and an anxiety disorder is the *frequency, intensity and severity* of the anxiety. While feeling anxious is a natural reaction to stressful situations, anxiety becomes a disorder when it interferes with a child's ability to handle everyday situations, or prompts children to avoid situations or activities that most children of their age enjoy². Performance anxiety and stage fright are common in children and do not necessarily signal the onset of an anxiety disorder. A pervasive and enduring pattern of shyness may however indicate a predisposing temperament for social anxiety. Children with Social Anxiety Disorder desire social interaction, but avoid social activity because of their extreme emotional distress. Their anxiety is often triggered by the fear that others will think badly of them, or the fear that they may do something embarrassing or humiliating³.

Children with Social Anxiety Disorder have an excessive and ongoing fear of social and/or performance situations such as school or sports activities and functions or events. They constantly feel "under the microscope" which can lead to a great deal of self-consciousness, distress, and avoidance. Some children are only afraid of speaking or performing in public, whilst others fear and avoid a wide range of social situations. Social Anxiety Disorder may develop suddenly, after a stressful or traumatic event, or develop slowly over a period of time. Common situations or affected areas include: public speaking or performing, participating in classroom activities, eating in front of others, using public bathrooms, joining in or talking to classmates, making phone calls, attending social events, talking to adults or authority figures, being assertive and/or expressing opinions.

For young children, anxiety about interacting with adults or peers may be shown by crying, having temper tantrums, clinging to parents, or refusing to speak in social situations. Older children with social anxiety may experience and/or display a combination of the following: 1. Negative Thoughts: such as "I'm going to say something stupid", "They won't like me", "I'm an idiot", or "They can tell I'm anxious"; 2. Physical Sensations: such as stomach aches, blushing, sweating, shaking, muscle tension, increased heart rate, and/or derealisation/feeling detached from their body; 3. Overwhelming Emotions: such as anxiety, fear, irritability, anger, sadness, embarrassment and/or helplessness; and 4. Unusual Behaviour: such as refusing to attend school, avoiding participation in new activities or going places, asking a parent to be present or available, declining invitations to social events, not answering in class, frequent crying or aggressive outbursts in social situations, refusing to go on a play date without a parent, mumbling or poor eye contact, staying home on weekends rather than spending time with friends.

Children with Social Anxiety Disorder often go unnoticed by teachers or parents as they are not children who act out; rather, they are the children who try to remain invisible. They tend to only be identified when they begin to miss school or when their marks start to decline⁴. Children who experience social anxiety are typically well behaved and obedient at school. They often do not voice their fears.

Shyness in itself is not a problem. It only becomes problematic if it interferes with a child's daily functioning or enjoyment in life. Many shy children go on to develop satisfying and long-term friendships and have outstanding careers and achievements. However, if shyness and social anxiety prevent a child from participating in everyday activities (such as classroom discussions), enjoyable events (such as parties) or from making lasting friendships then it is worth seeking help⁵.

For a list of references and links to more information on this topic please visit <http://www.christinedarney.co.za/Psych-Ed/psych-ed.html>