

# SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

## Shy and Anxious

**Question:** My six-year-old is an only child and has always been a little shy and anxious around new people and situations. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm helping or hurting when I try to protect her from situations that I'm pretty sure will be hard for her to manage on her own. How can I help my child deal with these difficult times?

Even if your child is predisposed to being shy or anxious, there are many things you can do to help her learn to manage her feelings in unfamiliar or challenging situations. When you support your child in Taking on Challenges, you are giving her a skill that she will use in all aspects of her life.

The researcher Nathan Fox at the University of Maryland has studied temperament in young children. He and his colleagues have identified genes that may underlie the tendency to be shy and anxious when facing new experiences. They have further found that while some children may be born with the predisposition to be shy or anxious, there is much that parents can do to help their children learn to regulate their emotions and behavior and manage these situations.

**Taking on Challenges:** Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

**1**

### Let your child watch first and move at her own pace.

Fox and his colleagues have found in their studies that shy children tend either to watch a new situation or to occupy themselves but not get involved with the other children right away. If this sounds like your daughter, you can:

- Let her know that it is fine to take as much time as she needs to get comfortable.
- Reassure her that you know she will learn to manage this kind of situation and that you are there to help her feel safe and calm. When your child trusts that you are truly there for her, she can learn from everyday setbacks and challenges.

**2**

### Talk to your child and brainstorm solutions.

Engage your child in a conversation about how she feels in these situations and help her to come up with solutions for dealing with them. If you ask your child in a calm moment and she knows you will take her seriously, she will most likely have some creative ideas for managing. With this approach, you're helping your child learn to develop her own coping skills rather than protecting her or fixing things for her.

If your child needs more support, you might suggest she keep a special toy in her pocket or give you a special sign if she's feeling nervous.

## 3

### Be aware of your own involvement.

Fox and his colleagues also found that there are things parents can do, unintentionally, that are not helpful to their anxious children.

- For example, some parents are “alarmist,” seeing danger everywhere. A parent who is being an alarmist might say things like: “Don’t” a lot or “You’re going to hurt yourself.” The feelings of fear from parents can even be communicated by facial expressions, so be mindful of how you look when your child is trying something hard.
- Other parents are “intrusive” or overprotective. These parents interfere with what their children are doing and don’t let them explore. This was your concern in writing this question. A helpful idea to remember is that you want your daughter to learn to meet new people and experience new situations, and your job is to support her as she takes steps to do so, not to fix things for her.

When parents guide instead of interfere, their children are more likely to take risks and to take on challenges without depending on others to solve their problems for them.

## 4

### Role play with your child.

Expectations are important in children’s lives, just like they are for adults. Rehearse with your child what might happen with new people and places. This can help her feel prepared to face difficult situations since she has practiced her responses in a safe and caring space with you. In the words of one six year old, your child can “practice not being shy.”

Jerome Kagan of Harvard University, the so-called “father of research on temperament,” has this advice for parents of shy children:

*[T]he advice is very simple. It’s something your grandmother would give. Don’t overprotect. Gradually expose the child to the events he or she is afraid of. Invite other children into the house, one at a time, and talk to your child.*

## 5

### Give your child plenty of opportunities to practice.

The more experience your child has in a variety of social experiences, the more likely she is to feel confident in Taking on Challenges like unfamiliar situations.

The American Academy of Pediatrics gives the following suggestions to support your child in feeling secure and confident:

- Support your child by giving hugs, participating in activities together and talking. Children with warm, nurturing parents are more likely to have confidence.

- Let your child get to know other trusted grown-ups by having that person babysit and by participating in group activities with other families.
- Give your child plenty of opportunities to play with other children the same age through afterschool activities or other children's groups.

## 6

## Manage your own stress.

In one of Fox's studies, he found that when parents have people to turn to—people upon whom they can rely when they feel stressed—that affects their own children's social development. Even if children have genes that push them toward being shy and anxious, they're far less likely to display these characteristics if parents can manage their own stress and if they have friends who can help them. Children learn from what they see and live and you are your child's most important role model.