

OVERCOMING Social Jitters

By Heidi Smith Luedtke, Ph.D.

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YOU CAN ONLY IMAGINE WHAT'S happening at school today. It's your daughter's turn for show-and-tell and she's been buzzing with apprehension for days. She's wearing her autographed High School Musical on Ice t-shirt and plans to tell the class about the skaters and the music, and about how she got Troy and Gabriella's autographs. You hope she doesn't freeze up, chatter aimlessly, or run back to her seat—your daughter isn't known for her poise under social pressure.

It's perfectly normal for kids to feel nervous when they meet someone for the first time, try a new hobby, or give a speech. But that flustered, jittery feeling isn't comfortable. Kids—like adults—may fear they'll say something stupid or do something embarrassing. When the anxiety gets really intense, kids may declare they're not going to school, not going on play dates, not having sleepovers.

"Childhood is tough for nearly everyone . . . it's full of missteps as well as new opportunities," says Bernardo Carducci, PhD, Director of the Shyness Research Institute at Indiana University Southeast and author of *The Shyness Breakthrough*. Although each child has unique experiences, Carducci notes anxious behavior is usually triggered by new, unpredictable social situations when a child's sense of self is on the line.

Parents shouldn't expect kids to grow out of their shyness, Carducci cautions, shy kids'



rarely turn into social butterflies. But parents can help kids develop social skills and confidence. Use these strategies to calm kids' social jitters and help them warm up to new situations:

■ **Share your experiences.** Your kids may not see you in challenging social situations but you can recount what happened when you made a presentation at work or when you first started kick boxing class. Describe the physical sensations you felt: racing heart, muscle tension, butterflies in your stomach, sweaty palms. Reveal your thoughts and emotions. Share "I was worried I'd forget what I was supposed to say," or "I thought, 'What if I fall over trying to kick the heavy bag and everyone laughs at me?'" Kids need to know their feelings are normal.

■ **Stop catastrophic thinking.** Social anxieties are like monsters under your bed—whether or not they are real, they grow bigger and hairier the more you think about them. Catastrophic thinking is the tendency to overestimate the bad consequences of our social blunders, says Gillian Butler, clinical psychologist and author of *Overcoming Social Anxiety and Shyness*. Your son may think that forgetting his lines in the school play will be the end of social life as he knows it; all his classmates will tease him. Help your child notice and combat negative expectations. Social slipups are rarely as awful as kids imagine.

■ **Channel anxious energy.** Negative emotions aren't bad—they help us pay attention to important events. Because negative emotions are attention getters, they can feel overwhelming. Help kids harness that hyped-up feeling and put it to constructive use preparing for the big event or working on a hobby. If kids focus on doing instead of worrying, nervous energy feels more like excitement than apprehension.

■ **Be prepared.** When kids don't know what to say, they may fear they'll clam up completely or stammer when the social pressure is on. Help your child prepare for upcoming interactions by identifying two conversation-starting questions she can use when she meets someone new. Open-ended questions work best, because they encourage the other person to share information about themselves. "Where did you go for vacation?" or "What is your favorite movie?" are good options. Of course, your child should be prepared to share her vacation destination and favorite film, too.

■ **Role play.** Acting out feared encounters can help kids identify what works and learn that flustered feelings don't last forever. Rehearse simple scenarios with your child, such as meeting a new friend, asking a question in class, or giving a brief presentation at Scouts. Let mom, dad, and the family dog serve as co-actors or audience members and practice until kids feel comfortable. Take role play seriously, but make it fun, too.

■ **Get a home-field advantage.** If your child has a hard time warming up, start on his home turf. Familiar surroundings are comforting, and with all his own toys as props, he'll have more to talk about. Invite a classmate over to play for a short period of time. Get kids started on a shared activity before fading into the background and letting your child test his skills. Don't interfere, let him find his own voice.

■ **Get busy.** It's easiest for kids to overcome social jitters when activities distract them from their fears. Build skills in social situations that have strong "scripts" for behavior, like having a friend over for dinner, playing a board game, or doing a craft project together. The familiar knowledge of "what we do next" makes these situations a lot less

frightening and lets conversation happen naturally. Move on to longer, less-scripted social events—like sleepovers—when your child has developed more skills and confidence.

■ **Praise progress.** Changing behavior isn't easy, and kids' continuing concerns may keep them from seeing how far they've come. Point out specific behaviors and praise them. Say "You introduced yourself first," or "Your voice was clear and strong." If she made or sustained good eye contact, let her know you noticed. When kids know what they're doing right, they do it more and more often.

■ **Take an honest look at your child's temperament.** If he's more comfortable playing solo and tunes out in a crowd, don't expect him to become the life of the party. Love your child for who he is, not for who you want him to become, Carducci advises. Kids can learn to warm up to new, unpredictable social situations with patient, persistent effort—but don't push. Allow your child time for relaxing, fun activities, including solitary play. It's hard to learn new skills when your stomach is queasy and your heart is racing. ☺

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