“Shyness can have a negative effect on learning”

Georg Stöckli discusses how shy children become more confident at school

Interview by Eveline von Arx
July 20, 2018

Crucial skills for success in school include the ability to participate actively in the classroom and to get along with others. Shy children are less confident in these areas than their peers, and this can have a negative effect on their learning and school performance.

Eveline von Arx: According to the latest studies, what fraction of primary school students are shy?

Georg Stöckli: My research in Switzerland indicates that approximately 18 percent of boys and 23 percent of girls consider themselves shy. Teachers perceive roughly 16 percent of the children in a given classroom to be unusually shy, and about 8 percent to be shy over an extended period of time. Teachers’ perceptions are very important, since when teachers regard a child as shy, it affects how they view many other aspects of the child’s performance as well.

EvA: How does shyness manifest itself in a school setting? How do shy children behave?

GS: First of all, it is important to remember that shyness is a very widespread phenomenon. Most people have experienced social inhibition in certain situations. The problem arises when normal, everyday activities trigger social anxiety and avoidance behaviors. At school, this affects peer relationships and classroom participation.

EvA: You mentioned peers: How do shy children interact with their peers?

GS: They worry more than other children do that they may not be liked, that they may be rejected, that they may be viewed negatively. Seeking to avoid such unpleasant experiences, shy children withdraw from interactions with others and reduce their social contacts. And doing so may in fact make them unpopular with their peers. It’s a vicious circle.

EvA: What is the correlation between school performance and shyness – particularly when it comes to class participation?

GS: Shy children don’t express their opinions; they don’t participate voluntarily. They are too fearful of making a mistake and being laughed at. Teachers sometimes mark them down because of their passive behavior. Indeed, shyness is associated with somewhat lower grades in language, arts and mathematics.

My research shows that even in preschool, there is a striking correlation between shyness and
teachers’ perceptions of a wide range of skills. Shy children are viewed by their teachers not only as less socially adept, but also as less competent learners. This puts them at a significant disadvantage relative to their socially confident, outgoing peers. However, I have found no direct correlation between shyness and intelligence. On the other hand, there is a very strong link between shyness and children’s confidence in their ability to do well in school.

“Even in preschool, there is a striking correlation between shyness and teachers’ perceptions of a wide range of skills.”

EvA: Does shyness affect learning in school?

GS: Yes. Social anxiety, leading to a lack of self-confidence, is not conducive to learning. Learning situations are often social situations as well. Shyness is particularly likely to have an effect when learning involves proactive social behavior in a classroom or group.

Because they lack self-confidence, shy students are frequently reluctant to ask questions when they don’t understand something, and they avoid sharing their ideas and opinions. Their talents can go unnoticed as a result, and they fail to gain the experience and skills that are important for successful learning and school performance.

EvA: What can teachers do to help shy children?

GS: In many cases, teachers attribute a student’s weak classroom participation to a lack of interest and motivation. If they realize that the student’s passivity is rooted in social anxiety, however, they will show more understanding. Shy children don’t like to be the center of attention. They can easily lose control of their behavior in such situations; in extreme cases, they may even suffer an anxiety attack. It is therefore unfair to force shy children into such situations without proper preparation.

Shy students should be given a chance to gradually become accustomed to the social challenges they encounter at school. Most important, they need a high level of “felt security.” Insisting on rules like “It’s okay to make mistakes” and “We don’t laugh at each other in this class!” can help shy children gain self-confidence in the school setting.

Prof. Georg Stöckli served as the director of the Research Center for Children and Schools at the Institute of Education, University of Zurich, Switzerland, until the end of 2015.

He created the “SoFiT” program, which focuses on behavioral and personality training and is designed to help shy children deal with the challenges they face at school. In this program, shy children practice doing the things that they avoid at school, or that cause them great discomfort: participating in class, approaching others, maintaining eye contact, speaking clearly, initiating a conversation, coping with being the center of attention, and much more. They learn that being brave is worthwhile and can even be fun.

References:


This article was published on BOLD, the Blog on Learning and Development. If you would like to share it with others, please do not use this PDF but instead link to the original post at https://bold.expert/shyness-can-have-a-negative-effect-on-learning/.