PEER-REVIEWED

Shy, Not Anti-Social

How to Include and Represent Shy Children in the Library

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Shyness in children is a phenomenon often overlooked as a trait that every child will "grow out of" or stigmatized as an emotional or behavioral anomaly, by caregivers as well as teachers. Yet, academic research on supporting shy children in the context of library youth services is scarce.

Unlike social anxiety or introversion, shyness is a lay term that is more difficult to pinpoint, yet inherently meaningful. Asendorpf defines the term broadly as, "various forms of modest, reserved, wary, inhibited, anxious, or withdrawn behaviors in social situations."[1] While this may serve as a functioning umbrella for a variety of behaviors, not all children who identify as being shy exemplify all of these behaviors.

Several scholars, such as Xu, Stacy, and Krieg, have proposed narrowing this definition into further subcategories: "shyness towards strangers" (reticent in novel social situations), "anxious shyness" (anxious about social perceptions), and "regulated shyness" (acting reserved as a conscious choice). In North America, shyness is often associated with the first two categories, and considered to be detrimental to personal growth.[2] Yet, in East Asian cultures such as Chinese and Japanese cultures, shyness is often associated with positive traits such as self-control, maturity, and social harmony.[3]

Unsurprisingly, Chinese children are also far less likely to see shyness as a permanent, immutable trait than American children.[4] In several Indigenous cultures across North America as well, such as the Cree, Inuit, and Yup'ik, social inhibition is considered to be both normative and desirable as a sign of adaptiveness.[5] On top of the already daunting task of integration with the dominant culture in a North American school, these shy children of different cultural backgrounds are often forced to participate in social contexts in which their shyness is neither understood nor supported by adults.

Apart from regulated shyness supported by certain cultures, shyness towards strangers and anxious shyness can also be explained by a variety of complex background factors. Plomin and Daniels presented a strong case for a genetic basis for shyness by reviewing several longitudinal twin studies, demonstrating that twins can each grow up to be shy even when raised in different households.[6] Evans et al. found that shyness, as well as antisocial/aggressive behaviors were possible results of authoritarian parenting with poor efficacy,[7] and Eapen et al. discovered further predictors for childhood shyness: low family sociability and maternal social anxiety.[8]

While these findings have a risk of leading to overly generalized assumptions about both shy children and their familial backgrounds, they shed light on the fact that shyness can be deeply embedded in the social and hereditary contexts that foster a child.

Shy Children in Collective Learning Environments

Many studies have found correlations between shyness and inhibited self-expression, lower academic performance, and reduced social acceptance at school.[9] While recent studies have argued that any academic disadvantages are largely overcome after preschool and early elementary school years,[10] the social

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consequences of shyness in a North American society that values confidence and achievement can still be significant. Furthermore, extreme cases of shyness towards strangers and anxious shyness are often tied to low self-esteem, and can be a risk factor for depression and social anxiety.[11]

Unfortunately, some studies have shown that many teachers and caregivers are poor at identifying signs of shyness, and hold prejudices against shyness in the classroom. A pertinent study by Spooner, Evans, and Santos found that one-third of middle-grade children who self-identified as "shy" were misidentified by their parents and teachers as "non-shy."[12] Moreover, those who are identified by their teachers as shy are often mentally flagged by teachers as being less intelligent and having poorer academic performance.[13]

Even well-intentioned teachers who lower their demands on shy children in an attempt to reduce anxiety can be doing more harm than good. Nyborg et al. found that instead of helping shy children feel included among their peers in oral activities, teachers often gave shy students obvious hints to answers to save them from embarrassing themselves publicly.[14] This approach, however benign, may lead to passive reliance on authority figures, as well as heightened self-consciousness in more sensitive children.

Implications and Recommendations for Youth Librarians

Even though public libraries are already perceived by many children and caregivers as a less formalized environment for learning and play, a shy child may not hold the same view, and may feel stressed by the mere idea of speaking to library staff, let alone participating in a youth program. The easiest and most fundamental step to helping shy children feel welcome is to be empathetic towards the challenges they may face, without singling them out of a group with overt special treatment.

Like all children of diverse needs, shy children would benefit from the practice of inclusive literacy, which focuses on harboring a sense of community and delivering dynamic programming that considers each individual's needs.[15] Instead of forcing stranger-shy and anxious-shy children to confront their fears, it is perhaps more conducive to help them see friends in place of strangers and alien social groups.

According to Crozier, teachers can show support to shy students by fostering an "environment that emphasizes acceptance, encouragement, and praise."[16] Nyborg et al. suggest that instead of simplifying oral activities for shy children, teachers can lower the stakes by making group activities playful.[17] Both of these suggestions can easily be transferred to a library youth programming context, in which children learn and play alongside their peers without the pressure of being graded.

As well, Rosheim proposes the use of alternative approaches to oral reflection and communication, such as writing, drawing, and using digital tools.[18] While it is healthy to give shy children chances to practice speaking up in a safe and low-stake setting, it can also be greatly helpful to incorporate other modes of expression into a youth program. This will not only help shy children build confidence, but improve multimedia literacy in all children involved.

In regards to examples from more specific programming, Lee found that participating in speaking activities with other players in the immersive online game Second Life helped improve self-expression in fifth grade Korean children.[19] This progress was especially prominent in children who had previously been identified as shy, which Lee attributed to online anonymity and the approach of "learning by doing."

Meanwhile, a more traditional program developed by Harris and Brown found that one-on-one cognitive behavioral modification sessions reduced shy children's fears of socializing and public speaking.[20] Although it would be difficult to emulate both of these programs in a public library, and somewhat contrary to the philosophy of inclusive literacy to implement the latter, both of these studies provide relevant insights on programming for shy children. Youth librarians may investigate ways to create an online community linked to their programming for children to explore at home, and may also find it useful to introduce practices of mindfulness into their programs.

For example, many youth librarians have been holding storytime sessions and book clubs through Zoom or similar online meeting platforms since the COVID-19 pandemic. Pointing out that the chat box is an option for communicating, as well as allowing participants to join with their cameras off, can send an encouraging message to shy children who are hesitant about participating in live programming. Whether online or in-person, establishing a check-in ritual at the start can also benefit all participants involved. A ritual can be as simple as a classic storytime song or dance, or a quieter one that guides participants to count their breaths together and observe (with the option to share) their emotions. Whichever approach, collective rituals establish a sense of familiarity, and can help children feel included and strengthen their relationship with the group.[21]

A helpful guide to helping shy children published on the *Virginia Infant and Toddler Specialist* blog suggests four tactics: start small, pair up, praise and reward, and read books.[22] A public library can be a good place to implement all of these. Aside from the first three tactics, which can be covered by youth programming, librarians can include books and other multimedia resources about shyness or shy children in readers' advisories. These resources need not always be about overcoming social fears, but can also be empowering stories about quiet protagonists and role models. There is no shortage of such booklists geared towards middle-years children and young teens online, and of course, still more relevant resources await discovery in the stacks.

Conclusion

Despite the prevalence of shyness among children, fostering the right atmosphere and creating relevant programs that support them are actions that are not as simple as they may sound. On one hand, librarians should not overlook the particular socio-emotional needs of shy children and expect them to participate at the same level as outgoing children; on the other, it can be more dangerous to the growth and self-perception of shy children to single them out for special treatment.

To better serve the often-invisible population of young children in the library, librarians can take the following approaches

- adopting the philosophy of inclusive literacy
- taking a playful approach to group activities
- encouraging a combination of both verbal and non-verbal modes of expression, and
- experimenting with virtual learning and practices of mindfulness.

In addition, librarians can encourage conversations about shyness between children and interested caregivers by suggesting relatable and inspiring book resources.

Labelling shy children as "anti-social" is outdated and far from fair, and the library is a great place to start fostering healthier perceptions for both shy children and the adults in their lives. &

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Bragging Rights and the Newbery

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In an article in the Spring 2022 issue of *Children and Libraries,* celebrating the centennial of the Newbery Medal, author Steven Herb provided an intriguing statistical examination of Newbery Medal and Honor Books and their creators. In addition, the author wished for a "country and state-by-state birth distribution."[1]

Of the ninety-five Newbery Medal authors to date, including this year's, eighty-three were born in the United States, which is expected since guidelines require authors to be US citizens or residents. Twelve medalists were born in other countries, including Canada, Hungary, India, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom.

New York can claim bragging rights with eighteen Medalists by birth. California ranks second with eight Medalists and Illinois third with seven. Pennsylvania comes in fourth with six authors. Herb would be proud of his home state!

Medalists by State:

California: 8
Connecticut: 3
Hawaii: 2
Idaho: 1
Illinois: 7
Indiana: 1
Kansas: 2
Maryland: 3
Massachusetts: 5
Michigan: 4
Minnesota: 1
Mississippi: 1
New York: 18
North Carolina: 2
New Jersey: 2
Ohio: 4
Oklahoma (Territory): 1
Oregon: 1
Pennsylvania: 6
Utah: 1
Virginia: 3
West Virginia: 2
New Mexico: 1
Wisconsin: 2
Wyoming: 1

To what extent, if any, do the birth locations of authors influence the settings of their Newbery Medal books? Maybe a question for further research!

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