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How to help a shy child participate in school

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Reviewed by the [BabyCenter Medical Advisory Board](#)

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Preschool and kindergarten are a child's first taste of school, entry points for the years of education that lie ahead. Some children find school a thrilling experience: They wave their hands in the air to answer questions, belt out songs during group sings, and are the first to sit down for snacks.

Other children are less thrilled. Shy or more reserved kids can find the strangeness and activity overwhelming. They may hesitate to speak out in class, hold back from the group, or prefer to keep to themselves, playing quietly in a corner.

Should I be concerned about a shy child?

You want your child to be enthusiastic about his first years in school — but try not to fret too much, especially if your child's still in preschool. During the preschool years kids are just beginning to learn how to interact with peers and participate in group activities. Many preschool-age children still feel most comfortable doing parallel play alongside other kids, observing and imitating rather than playing directly with friends. In kindergarten most children play interactively, but are still adjusting to the social environment of school. In both preschool and kindergarten, children are testing new ground, learning new rules of behavior. It's a process that can take time.

Just as personalities differ, kids vary tremendously, and normally, in how they relate in school — from eager beavers to quiet mice. Some children take longer than others to adjust to a daily classroom routine or to a new school, teacher, or class, but they eventually open up. Others stay shy — and there's nothing wrong with that. Normal shyness is not a problem that needs fixing.

"It's okay to be quiet, and it's okay to be shy," says kindergarten teacher Charles Darby. "Let your child develop his own sense of what's comfortable. Don't make a big deal about it at a young age."

Your child doesn't need to be a gung-ho, first-in-line student to learn. But easing his fears even a little can make school a more enjoyable experience, which promotes learning and is a worthy goal.

How can I encourage my shy child?

Talk to the teacher. Darby, who teaches in Northern California, has worked with many reserved children. As many teachers and other experts do, he stresses the need for parents to stay in touch with teachers and school staff. Parent-teacher communication is an important tool for helping shy kids in school.

Start by comparing notes on how your child acts at school and at home. What activities does your child love at home that aren't part of the classroom? What does your child dislike that he or she is expected to do at school? Gather information with your child's teachers, and look for ways to help make the classroom an engaging and comfortable place. "Meet with the teacher and work out a plan," says Meg Zweiback, a nurse practitioner, family consultant, and

associate clinical professor at the University of California at San Francisco.

Bring his interests to school. For example, if your child is fascinated by bugs but bugs haven't been talked about much at school, let him bring his collection to the classroom. Make sure the teacher doesn't force your child to make a formal presentation, but ask her to set up an opportunity for your child to talk or answer questions. The teacher could hold a bug discussion using your child's materials as the visual aids, or create a bug station based on your child's supplies.

Lydia Lewis, a Chicago mom whose daughter Julia had a hard time with preschool participation, found that supporting her interests made a difference. "I encouraged her to bring things to school that she wanted to show the class," she says, "her shell collection, our hamster, some rocks. This gave her a way to share herself."

Even if your child doesn't speak up right away, just having his favorite things in class can help melt his shyness. He can participate and feel a sense of belonging without being verbal, which is a start. He may be into bugs or trains or cats, but even sharing a book or toy your child loves can help.

Go to school. Your being in the classroom can help your shy child feel more comfortable at school. Your schedule may not allow regular or lengthy classroom visits, but even touching base now and then gives you a chance to observe. Most kids will consider a visit from Mom or Dad a special treat. "I'd go in and read to Julia's class," Lewis says. "It was helpful for me to know what was going on."

Set him up for success. If you can visit your child's classroom, see whether the games, projects, and activities there are a good match for your child, providing stimulation and opportunities for success. "Your child may be avoiding things because he doesn't think he can do them," says Dale Walker, a professor of child development at the University of Kansas in Lawrence.

If many classroom activities seem above your child's ability level, talk to the teacher about simplifying them. If your child struggles with naming all the letters of the alphabet, the teacher can help him focus on just a few. If your child isn't well coordinated with scissors or glue, make sure painting or drawing is an option. "If the activity is over the child's head, you want to tone it down," says Walker. "Make sure your child doesn't get frustrated."

Make sure he's challenged. It may be that activities at school are boring your child because they're too easy. If you suspect this is an issue, work with the teacher on ways to give your child more challenge. Maybe the teacher could borrow materials from a higher grade to have on hand for your child.

Help him at home. Some children have an easier time grasping new skills in a quiet place, without the stimulation and pressures of the classroom. If your child is awkward painting with a brush, do painting projects together at home. Find out what songs your child enjoys most from school, and sing them around the house or dining table.

Give your child chances to practice, but try not to make it pressure. Young children master new skills at different paces, and there's no need to turn it into work. The idea is to build your child's confidence. "The key is to make sure you don't push your child too much," Walker says.

Focus on his accomplishments. Don't just pay attention to the stumbling blocks. Doing fun and easy school activities at home is a wonderful way to ease participation fears. Most classes have favorite group songs, belted around the classroom or at least at music or circle time. Find out which ones your child enjoys, and make them part of the evening routine. If your child gains confidence in singing at home, this can rub off in the classroom.

Be his "student." Parent trainer Zweiback recommends that children role-play "school" at home with dolls and stuffed animals as a nonthreatening way to practice being in the classroom. "Set up a school with teddy bears, and let your child act it out," she says. You can help organize the game, and participate as one of the "students," but let your child steer the flow of the classroom. You may discover school fears, such as mean kids or a teasing teacher. If, as his "student," you can play lightly at being scared of the kids or the teacher, your child will find this very funny, and his laughter will help release some of his scary feelings so that he can be more confident. Talk about what's going on, ask your child questions, and use the information for talks with school staff.

How can I tell if my child is more than just shy?

What to do when he's more than shy. Most shyness or quietness is not a serious problem, but a few red flags may indicate that your child needs professional attention. If your child cries or throws tantrums on a regular basis before or at school, is significantly withdrawn most of the time, making little eye contact, or acts violently in school, hitting other kids or teachers, talk to your pediatrician or the school psychologist.

