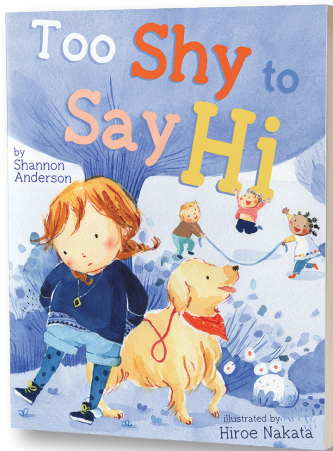




AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

# Help Your Kids Cope With Social Anxiety

## by Dr. Elizabeth McCallum



Many kids are shy around strangers, but “warm up” after becoming familiar with a person or situation. But sometimes kids experience fear and anxiety about participating in everyday social situations like playing with neighborhood kids and attending school. In Shannon Anderson’s book, *Too Shy to Say Hi*, Shelli’s fears and anxieties prevent her from joining in on activities she would certainly enjoy.

In this excerpt from the Reader’s Note in *Too Shy to Say Hi*, Dr. Elizabeth McCallum explores the difference between shyness and social anxiety and offers tips to help your child feel more confident and relaxed in social situations.

You can purchase the full book with 20% off and free domestic shipping [here](#). Enter code **MPKIDS20** at checkout.

### Shyness or Social Anxiety?

Shyness is a part of many kids’ temperament, or the personality traits that determine the unique way in which they interact with the world. It may take a shy child a little while to get comfortable with a new person or situation. However, sometimes shyness is so extreme that it interferes with a person’s social development, causing significant distress. Social anxiety is a term used to describe when a person avoids everyday social activities because they’re worried about being judged or fear behaving in ways that might bring about embarrassment. Usually people with social anxiety don’t have any trouble interacting with family members and close friends, but the idea of meeting new people, speaking in public, or unfamiliar situations can put their anxiety symptoms into high gear.

### Fight-or-Flight?

We all feel anxious or scared sometimes. In fact, feeling anxious can be helpful in certain situations. Our bodies and brains are hardwired to feel anxious and respond to these feelings with our fight-or-flight response. When our brains sense danger, they release adrenaline and other chemicals that cause all kinds of bodily reactions: quickened heartbeat, rapid breathing, sweating, and even goosebumps. Evolutionarily speaking, the fight-or-flight response helped

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to keep us safe from predators. Today the fight-or-flight response continues to keep us safe from different dangers like walking into oncoming traffic or eating spoiled foods.

But what about when the danger isn't real? When someone has social anxiety, or any type of anxiety problem, they feel anxious in situations where there is no real danger at all. Their fight-or-flight response gets activated too frequently, too powerfully, and in situations where it isn't actually necessary.

### How Does Social Anxiety Affect Daily Life?

Social anxiety is a common mental health diagnosis in childhood, with the typical age of onset between 8 and 15 years old. People with social anxiety have fears regarding their social performance. They tend to be highly self-conscious and have an extreme fear of being judged by others. School, for example, is a very social time for kids. Kids may spend hours at school each weekday, interacting with peers and teachers. Social anxiety can keep kids from participating in everyday school and extracurricular activities. Unstructured time, like lunch or recess, may be the worst for these kids because there is the most opportunity for social rejection. Some kids may also avoid raising their hands in class to answer questions which can keep them from getting the most benefit out of academic instruction. It can also limit their access to positive reinforcement from teachers for answering questions, and possibly mask areas of weakness in which they may need additional teacher help.

### How to Help Your Child

Distinguishing between shyness and social anxiety can be difficult. Regardless of whether you believe your child is naturally shy or experiencing social anxiety, you may want some tips to help them become more confident and comfortable interacting with others. The following are some ideas for school-aged children:

- **Arrange playdates with a single, trusted friend.** If the playdate is at the friend's house, your child may be more comfortable initially if you go along.
- **Practice public speaking at home.** Do this before any type of class presentation, show-and-tell, beginning of school introductions, etc.
- **Do not compare your child to a less shy sibling or peer.** Instead, reinforce your child for small improvements or strides in overcoming shyness, like making eye contact or ordering at a restaurant.
- **Prepare your child for public gatherings.** Give your child a "heads up" before social events, so that they can mentally prepare. Remind them that they are safe, and you'll be close by if they need you.
- **Encourage a social extra-curricular.** Help your child choose one extra-curricular activity of interest that also has a social component. This can be a natural way for your child to practice their social skills in an activity of interest to them.
- **Encourage relaxation strategies.** Strategies such as deep breathing, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation have been shown to help reduce intense physical symptoms in the moment so that individuals can focus on using coping strategies.
- **Use cognitive reframing.** Help your child reframe unhelpful thoughts with more helpful ones. For instance, try replacing the negative thought "everyone will think I'm stupid if I answer the questions wrong," with "everyone gets questions wrong sometimes. I don't think the other kids are stupid when they answer wrong, so why would they think that about me?"

- **See professional help.** If you believe your child's anxiety is negatively affecting their ability to attend school, interact with peers, or some other area of functioning, do not hesitate to seek help from a trained mental health professional. Social anxiety is a very treatable condition, and with the help of a therapist, kids can learn skills to cope with their anxiety. The American Psychological Association has a [therapist locator](#) that can help you find a therapist near you.

Overcoming social anxiety takes hard work, lots of practice, and the courage to face one's fears and take part in new experiences. You can help your child build skills to manage their social anxiety and take baby steps toward overcoming their shyness, just like Shelli did!

### **This Article's Author**

Elizabeth McCallum, PhD, is an associate professor in the school psychology program at Duquesne University, as well as a Pennsylvania certified school psychologist. She is the author of many scholarly journal articles and book chapters on topics including academic and behavioral interventions for children and adolescents.