

## “Supporting Shyness”

Many parents are surprised when they discover that their second (or third or fourth) child is very different from their first in all sorts of ways. It can start when they are newborn, not just for the parents themselves but also others. People often ask "does he/she look like your first baby?"

I wasn't any different. How surprised I was at how different my second child looked! She was smaller, with lots of long black hair and even as a newborn had a unique 'personality'. It wasn't that I wanted her to be like my first one, I just found it fascinating that this little person was (and still is) is so completely different.

My first daughter is very confident, whereas my second daughter, Kiara, has always been a bit more timid. Shy even. My eldest loved play dates, exploring, and talking to people (even strangers). Kiara, on the other hand, always stayed nearby; practically within a 50cm radius of wherever I was.

*I found it fascinating that this little person was so completely different.*

Parenting a shy child involves a different approach – simply being 'positive' and 'encouraging' isn't always enough. I am not shy and quite 'outgoing' myself, so one of the first steps for me was to accept my daughter for the way *she* experienced the world.

A trip to the playground for her did *not* involve running around, climbing, swinging or exuberant yelling. She was happy to push her dolly in the swing, watch other children playing and stare at the ducks on the pond.

*Simply being 'positive' and 'encouraging' isn't always enough.*

Her experience of school was different again, and brought new challenges. The biggest one was "news" or "show & tell", where children stand in front of the class and talk to their peers about a particular topic or event.

Last year she had a lovely, calm and understanding teacher who encouraged her in a gentle way. She would sometimes take the pressure off by permitting Kiara to not deliver her "news", and this seemed to help.

Raising children is very much about allowing them to develop their own personality and 'be themselves', regardless of how outgoing or introverted

they may be. However this should be balanced with helping children to develop the social skills they will need to interact with others.

With a very sociable child it might be about helping them to learn social cues so they can regulate their energy and enthusiasm for talking and interacting with others. On the other hand, for a shy child it can be about finding ways to gently nudge them out of their 'comfort zone' to help them gain confidence in social situations.

Some of the ways that we did this for Kiara included:

- I enrolled her in after school activities like kids' cooking lessons. Not because she couldn't cook: the idea was that she would attend these lessons by herself, without her best friend, or her big sister. Because cooking is something that she already mastered, she felt comfortable enough to do this.
- We tried to not speak for Kiara and encourage her to order her own meals at cafes or to speak to shop attendants when buying something. We never forced her, just encouraged and praised her when she did!
- Similarly we asked her older sister not to speak for Kiara, as this happened a lot.
- We let her make phone calls (to people she knows well)

Since last year, Kiara has been less shy. She still has her shy moments of course, in situations that don't seem frightening or intimidating to me - like waving back at a class-mate. But overall her shyness doesn't seem to be interfering with her daily life. She seems happy and socially connected.

*I'm still secretly surprised when she starts a conversation*

I'm still secretly surprised when she starts a conversation with the taxi driver, waitress or hair dresser. And so proud too of course! I can't be sure what it is precisely that brought about this change, but I think that approaching it gently and using different strategies was the key. And remembering that she is her own person and will always be different to her sister and her mum!

---

*Please seek permission from Parent Line before reproducing this article, by contacting us on 1300 1300 52 or [info@parentline.org.au](mailto:info@parentline.org.au)*