The
Shy Child

Philip G. Zimbardo is Professor Emeritus of Psychology, Stanford University, and past president of the American Psychological Association. He is the creator/narrator of the popular PBS-TV series, "Discovering Psychology."

Before her death in 1991, **Shirley L. Radl** was a journalist and author.

The Shy Child

A Parent's Guide to Preventing
and Overcoming Shyness from
Infancy to Adulthood

Philip G. Zimbardo

and
Shirley L. Radl

MALOR
BOOKS

This book is dedicated to our children,
Adam, Zara, and Tanya Zimbardo,
Lisa and Adam Radl,

And to our students, both shy and not

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CONTENTS

Unraveling the Mystery
of Shyness

Perhaps the last thing in the world parents think about when anticipating the birth of a child is whether the child will be shy. We pray that the baby will be healthy and normal, and when he or she arrives, we count the tiny fingers and toes and set out on the incredible journey that is parenting. We keep height and weight charts, record milestones of first words and steps, buy books to encourage early reading—and now we even buy little computers to get our soon-to-be math whiz kids on their way.

The emphasis on motor development, language skills, and learning has tended to divert the attention of parents, teachers, and even child psychologists away from the social and emotional growth of the child. It is only recently that professional "child watchers" have come to realize the serious effects of ignoring or taking for granted the so-called "normal" development of social responsiveness and emotional health in children. As an article in the *Sage Foundation Report* stated, "Despite the growth of developmental research over the past 20 years, the study of social and emotional development in children has continued to lag behind research on other aspects of development."

We usually wait until *after* some problem behaviors appear—when the child is "too shy"—to realize that there is need to be concerned. For some parents and teachers the concern is minimal as long as the child is well behaved, quiet, and follows the

rules. Indeed, shyness may be seen as desirable to those adults who believe "silence is golden," "children should be seen and not heard," or "obedience to authority" is the highest rule. Fortunately (for our children), not all parents and other grown-ups to whom they are entrusted see it that way. One parent might react with embarrassment to his or her child's shyness when, for instance, the child responds to another adult's attention by running and hiding behind mother or father and hanging on for dear life. And then there are parents who share the view of the concerned mother of a six-year-old who wrote the following letter:

I have a six-year-old daughter who is extremely shy, and who has an extremely poor opinion of herself. Her excessive shyness has caused her a great deal of discomfort in peer as well as adult relationships. She has been placed in pre-first instead of first grade because of her inability to deal confidently with others of her own age. She adapts with extreme difficulty to new situations. I am afraid she will be consistently placed in the lower class grouping because of her emotional makeup.

   She does not relate to the outside world easily, she holds so much inside and reacts in such a frustrated way. She can be a lovely, sensitive child, but I'm so afraid she'll find the world a hostile place unless someone can help her.

-Excerpted from a letter to Dr. Zimbardo

Not unlike many parents who have written to us or spoken with us, the mother fears that shyness may be ruining her child's life, and she's looking for answers before it is too late.

   It is apparent that anything that makes your child unhappy, such as being unpopular, not feeling comfortable around peers, and being unable to communicate thoughts effectively or to express feelings directly, is a health hazard. As we shall soon discuss, these are but a few of the negative consequences that shyness imposes in its silent mission to destroy the human connection.

   Now for the good news. After studying shyness for the past

nine years by surveying thousands of people of all ages and backgrounds in the United States and eight other cultures, conducting in-depth interviews with shy youngsters, their parents, and teachers; observing shy children in classrooms of every grade level from preschool through college; and performing systematic experimental research that compared the behavior of shy to not-shy people, we have discovered not only the range of its consequences, but also what causes shyness, and what can be done to minimize, overcome, or prevent it. This pioneering investigation of our Stanford University Shyness Research Project has begun to reveal what lies behind the many masks of shyness. In the Stanford Shyness Clinic (along with Meg Marnell and Rochelle Kramer) we have developed different means—strategies and tactics proven effective—of helping shy people cope with the many personal problems that shyness poses.

From the researcher's point of view, shyness is a fascinating phenomenon. It is at the very core of what it means to be human; where individuals make contact with each other—or where they fail in their efforts to become social beings. Charles Darwin, writing in 1890, observed that shyness is often recognized by blushing, which is "the most peculiar and the most human of all expressions." From an analytical perspective, shyness makes us keenly aware of freedom and its constraints. Indeed, shyness can be thought of as a self-imposed loss of basic freedoms, much as incarceration denies prisoners their rights to freedom of speech, association, and acting in one's own best interests. The more we learn about the dynamics of shyness, the more the myths fall by the wayside and curious paradoxes emerge, such as the bottled-up rage in the good, shy "pussycat" boy who makes headlines as a mass murderer—the first naughty deed of his life.

But the detached perspective of the researcher gives way to the pain that we feel as parents when we watch a shy child desperately wanting to be accepted by other children yet not

knowing what to do to gain their approval, or else too frightened to take the risk of trying to reach out to them. They may feel as Anna did. She writes:

During my adolescence I was so shy that at age nineteen I became emotionally ill and needed professional help. Growing up is painful at best, but excruciating for the shy. When others could not understand the reason for my lack of zest for life, I knew all along that my shyness was the real problem. I was terribly envious of anyone who seemed comfortable with people. Anyone who could express their thoughts and feelings verbally...not only I but all those near and dear to me, suffered immeasurably because of this illness—which has lasted for sixty-four years!

The silent prison of shyness can be a nightmare for shy students who have not learned "to work and play well with others" or to recite in class what they have studied and know well. A first-year law student with a 3.94 college Grade Point Average (GPA)—4.0 is perfect!—had to withdraw before the first quarter was over not because of lack of ability or motivation but, as she says, "because I am so shy that I could not take sitting in class and hoping (praying) that I won't be called on." As a college student she could hide out in the back of large lecture courses performing spectacularly in multiple-choice exams, but when she had to strut her stuff in front of the law class, the quicksand of shyness sucked her under.

But this young student's fear is not all that unusual. In fact, it is *the* most common human fear, according to a recent survey of 3,000 U.S. residents. When responses were tallied to the question: "What are you most afraid of?" "darkness" came in twelfth, "flying" was eighth, "sickness and death" were tied for sixth place. In third place there was another tie among 22 percent of the respondents with "fear of financial problems" and "fear of insects and bugs." "Fear of heights" had a large vote of 32 percent, ranking it second behind the biggest fear of all, at 41 percent, "speaking before a group."

In our surveys, a comparable figure of 42 percent emerged when people were asked whether they considered themselves to be "shy." Thus about two out of every five people you meet think of themselves as shy. Many of those who are not shy now, however, reported being shy at some time in the past. About 80 percent of all those surveyed revealed that they are shy now or used to be shy. The majority of those who labeled themselves as shy go on to describe this disposition as "undesirable" and a "serious problem" that interferes with their lives.

It is, of course, possible to think of yourself as not being shy yet to have occasional feelings of shyness. The contrast is between the chronic shys who believe shyness is "in them," a trait, a part of their personality makeup that gets uncovered by other people, and the situational shys who believe that certain undesirable situations cause them to react in an unnatural, shy manner. For the situational shys, the fault lies in the nature of social situations that force them to perform, to feel on the spot, etcetera. As a first step in reducing the negative impact of shyness, we have helped those who suffer chronically by getting them to reevaluate their shyness as an often appropriate reaction to situational pressures.

In 1977 we began to zero in on specific age groups, and when we surveyed high school students we found that the incidence of shyness—about 40 percent—was the same as that in the adult sample. However, when we surveyed junior high school students, the figure jumped to over 50 percent, with the increase owing largely to the prevalence of shyness in a majority of adolescent girls. Shyness is a major symptom of the many problems of adolescence—especially those problems for females undergoing the transition from elementary-school girl to woman. We held a series of informal meetings with groups of these youngsters to better appreciate how shyness functions at this age. (Later, chapter 7, we shall discuss in depth why adolescents feel "all eyes are on them" and that their parents are always prying to find out their "real selves.")

When studying younger children, we don't find this split between the public self teenagers show the world and their private self revealed only to "dear diary" and the closest of confidants. In pre-teenagers what you see is usually what they are feeling and thinking.

A study of grade school children by one of our research team members, Trudy Solomon, found the same prevalence of self-reported shyness—42 percent—as we have found repeatedly with adult samples. These 204 children, ages nine to thirteen, from Oakland and Richmond, California, schools, showed no differences in shyness between the sexes. There was a trend, however, for the extent of shyness to increase in children in the fourth to sixth grades. This result fits with other data we have on junior high school students that shows an escalation of shyness in adolescence.

When these grade schoolers were asked to rate themselves on five-point scales on a series of traits, such as active-passive and cold-warm, the shy students differed significantly from the not-shys in perceiving themselves to be: less friendly, more fearful, more passive, less sociable, more introverted, liking themselves less, and as less tolerant of others.

This last trait raises an especially important point for our understanding of the dynamics of shyness. One paradoxical consequence of shys being excessively concerned about being evaluated is their own tendency to be evaluative and critical of others. Although shy children are sensitive to external constraints that influence "problem behaviors" in other children, they are still likely to label that child in negative ways. Similarly, in a study with female college students, it was found that when shys were presented with case studies of a peer in trouble, they were less sympathetic, proposing to treat the peer's psychological problem by institutionalizing her rather than by working with her in a counseling, therapeutic relationship.

In an investigation of how teachers, parents, and elementary school children (ages seven and eight) evaluate shyness,

researchers discovered some shy behaviors that were specific to the situation (of home or school) and others that were consistent across settings. The parents and teachers of 135 Iowa schoolchildren completed rating scales of the shy/nonshy characteristics of each child. The children gave peer ratings on tape-recorded stories of shy and not-shy behaviors.

Significant agreement between judgments of shyness in school and home settings was found for the following eight behaviors. Those who agreed that the presence of such behavior was indicative of a given child's shyness are noted next to that behavior:

1. conforming   *(Father/Teacher)*
                                   Mother/Teacher

2. timid   *Mother/Teacher*
                                   Father/Teacher
                                   Mother/Peer

3. easily embarrassed   *Mother/Peer*

4. soft voice   *Mother/Teacher*
                                   Mother/Peer

5. talks little   *Mother/Teacher*

6. rarely shares problems
   or ideas: *Mother/Teacher*

7. rarely initiates
   interactions   *Mother/Teacher*

8. timid when meeting
   strangers   *Mother/Peer*

It is interesting to note that fathers tended to be inconsistent in their ratings of shyness. They were in least agreement with any of the other three raters: mothers, teachers, children. Either they had a different definition or criterion for shyness, or they knew their child less well than did the other judges.

For our research on preschoolers we could not rely upon questionnaires and direct interviews with children. Instead, we used four different sources of information to discover what it means for a three-, four-, or five-year-old child to be shy. We (and our research assistants) observed a number of preschool class settings, then administered our Stanford Shyness Survey Questionnaire to parents and teachers for them to evaluate the shyness of their children and students. Finally, we devised a gamelike test of shyness to indirectly assess the preschool child's conception of shyness.

Parents, teachers, and research observers were in surprisingly close agreement as to which children were shy, largely because shyness is such a public event at this young age. The child hasn't yet learned how to conceal self-doubts and social anxieties with the kind of subtle strategies that often mask the older person's private self from public scrutiny. One-third of the preschoolers were judged to be shy children, although some were more shy in school than at home, while others were more shy outside of the safety base of school or home.

Our "Which puppet is shy?" game presented the child with two adorable hand puppets, one of whom was introduced as the shy puppet, the other as the not-shy puppet. In response to each of a dozen questions, the child pointed to the puppet that was the correct answer: for example, the one who "plays alone the most," "doesn't like to talk to other people," and so forth. While reserving the details of that study for a later discussion of how to help preschool-age children overcome their shyness, several general conclusions are important to state now. By four years of age (middle-class) children in our culture have a coherent conception of what it means to be shy; shyness is a

negative state that inhibits social actions and interactions and restricts opportunities to have fun. The children can identify with the puppet who is "shy like them," but regardless of their own shyness, prefer to be like the not-shy puppet.

This research on shyness in children complements our earlier (and still ongoing) investigation of shyness in adults. One goal is a better understanding of how shyness develops—the forms it takes and the consequences it has. Another goal is to use that knowledge to help parents, teachers, and shy people intervene in ways that will undo the toll that shyness extracts. For those already shy, there is much that can be done to reduce its inhibiting effects and even to overcome it completely. The prevention of shyness will also be discussed in this book as part of a general program of personality development designed to encourage your child to be sociable, to enjoy people, to be able to take appropriate risks, to better accept failures, and to perform up to his or her own potential.

Before we begin to share ideas with you about how to help shy children at each of the four age categories we've studied—preschool, elementary school, junior and senior high school, and college age—let's first consider just what shyness is, the forms it assumes, the experiences that trigger it, and the ways it affects the lives of the young as well as their elders.

Shyness is ...

Shyness is a mental attitude that predisposes people to be extremely concerned about the social evaluation of them by others. As such, it creates a keen sensitivity to cues of being rejected. There is a readiness to avoid people and situations that hold any potential for criticism of the shy person's appearance or conduct. It involves keeping a very low profile by holding back from initiating actions that might call attention to one's self. In three words, "reserved," "cautious," "suspicious," shy-

ness was defined by Dr. Samuel Johnson in his 1804 *Dictionary of the English Language.*

Most of us do experience some degree of that kind of shyness *naturally.* It functions as a natural protective device—a sensible reserve that allows people to size up new experiences before rushing in. And in that reflective pause we try to determine what is expected, appropriate, and desirable to say and do, in such a place and at that time. This cautious approach is most evident when we encounter new people (especially when they seem dissimilar to us), or when we're in situations where the rules of the game are unclear or unknown. The most outgoing of children can be observed clinging to a parent, when a band of visiting relatives descends upon them with big, wet kisses. ("Whatsamatter, cat's got your tongue? Come over here and tell Uncle Louie what you're gonna be when you grow up! Don't be shy, I won't bite you!")

Hint of advice: Don't allow *anyone* to label your child "shy," not even you, his or her loving parent. Tell it like it is, as spokesperson for the child's rights: for example, "he needs a little time to get to know you better, after all he was only a few months old on your last visit."

Shyness, this "natural reticence," is most intense and pervasive in young children simply because so many situations are new and so many people are strangers to them. With maturation comes an expanded memory for faces, places, and how to act to get what they want and stay out of trouble. And in most cases, with experience, the child learns how to make "small talk" and to use other tactics for gradually reducing the unfamiliarity gap. The important point here is to try to look at the current situation from the child's perspective. When we do, it usually becomes obvious that something or someone in that situation is provoking the child's bashful reaction. Consider what an observer from out of space would conclude about the shyness of all earth creatures if the alien were to judge us by how little we talk to each other in elevators.

Shyness is a virtue, "a special grace to be celebrated" according to some philosophers, artists, and others who prefer solitude to socializing. They'd rather be alone, to think, write, paint, or commune with nature. If shyness is *chosen*, and found compatible with one's life goals, then being shy is just doing one's own thing with minimal social contact. There are those who are not shy who view shyness as desirable in others because it makes them act modest, unassuming, demure, and agreeable. However, it also makes such shys more easily influenced and controlled by not-shy exploiters. We have yet to meet one very shy person, whether he or she be four or eighty-four, who sees shyness as a personal asset. Rather, it is seen as an affliction, an unwelcome state of being that forces them to shrink back from life, sometimes all the way to isolation and loneliness.

According to the current psychiatric diagnostic manual, shyness is a social phobia, its essential feature "is a persistent, irrational fear of, and compelling desire to avoid situations in which the individual may be exposed to scrutiny by others. There is also fear that the individual may behave in a manner that will be humiliating or embarrassing."

Some people have a fear of spiders or snakes, others show a phobic avoidance of heights or airplanes. In the presence of the feared object, anxiety surges and threatens to overwhelm the person unless he or she flees through the nearest exit. But those with snake phobias can live in the city and phobics with fear of heights can live and work in one-story houses. Where do those with a "people phobia" go? They avoid anxiety-provoking people by going within themselves, by tuning out and turning off others. In doing so, they intensify their self-awareness and egocentric preoccupation. Furthermore, when most people become anxious, they feel vulnerable and don't want others to know it. The way they cope with such feelings is to isolate themselves until they can get their anxiety under control. But such isolation only serves to worsen feelings of shyness and

deprives the person of opportunities to practice social skills.

Shyness tends to go hand-in-hand with low self-esteem. Although shy people may value some skill or special ability they may possess, most are their own worst critics. Paradoxically, one source of this poor self-image comes from the high standards shy people tend to set for themselves. They are always coming up short when the yardstick is measured in units of perfection. A case in point is Steve, a community college student who describes himself in these terms: "I'm six-foot-four inches tall, weigh two hundred pounds, and am reasonably strong, handsome, and intelligent. Therefore, one would expect me to feel competent, confident, and comfortable around others. But I don't. I feel inferior—physically and mentally to others, and I feel painfully incompetent and uncomfortable around them."

To help Steve and others like him, requires a lot of self-esteem boosting, which you will see can be readily accomplished with concerted effort. What is harder to alter is the second source of the shy person's low self-esteem: feelings of insecurity.

Ideally, the relationship between parent and child should enable the child to develop a sense of identity that is anchored in a firm belief in his or her own self-worth. Where love is not given freely, then love is given conditionally for doing the "right thing." Under such conditions, ego and self-respect are put on the line every time the child, and later the adult, takes some action. The message is clear: You are only as good as your most recent success, but never better than the sum of all your failures. Approval, acceptance, and love are thus seen as commodities exchangeable for "desirable behavior." And most frightening, they can be taken away at a moment's notice for doing the wrong thing. And saddest of all, the insecure, shy person accepts the loss as justifiable because he or she really didn't deserve to "make the team" or "get the raise," "get asked

to dance," or "apply for a top job." Even after a number of set-backs, the love-assured person still keeps the faith in his or her own essential goodness and self-worth. Like a good baseball player in a slump or a top salesperson with a run of "misses," this individual accepts failure and rejection as an inevitable consequence of taking necessary risks, of competing, of reaching beyond the comfortable attainment of the sure thing for the challenge of uncertainty.

The next two chapters will deal specifically with this central issue in shyness by examining how some parenting styles can induce insecurity, while others can build a solid foundation of self-confidence that helps the child resist self-esteem assaults from peers and authorities outside the home.

Feeling Shy

What does it feel like to be shy? wonders the non-shy person. And shy people often wonder whether or not other shys feel the same things they do when the red alert, "shyness-is-at-hand" signal is sounded. Our in-depth interviews with shys and not shys reveal the range of reactions and intensity of feeling that go into the making of a shy person.

Some people experience only slightly shy feelings and are hesitant and uncertain in their social relations or are easily embarrassed. Some people are merely timid. But at the extreme end of the spectrum is a chronic fear of people which can keep a shy person from entering into any social encounter at all.

Fear!! The one word that appears again and again in discussions of shyness is "fear." The four most dominant fears are: fear of being negatively evaluated by others one encounters; fear of failure to respond in social situations (not knowing what to say or do, or becoming "tongue-tied"); fear of being rejected by someone who is liked or controls a desired resource; and fear of intimacy (having to reveal one's "real self" and "true feelings" to another person in private).

Such fears are typically accompanied by physical arousal in which the adrenaline shoots up, pulse increases, heart pounds, butterflies flutter around the stomach, perspiration flows, and a blush appears. Each of these symptoms of internal discomfort occurs in more than 40 percent of the shy Americans surveyed.

While the shy body is churning, the shy mind is even more agitated. It is filled with unpleasant thoughts and sensations. There is an excessive degree of self-consciousness, overconcern for how poorly the situation is being handled and what kind of evaluation others are making, as well as free-floating negative thoughts.

I am living in a churning, painful anxiety of self-preoccupation, and I'm tired of it. Somewhere in me I know there is the capacity to be free, to laugh, to love (maybe even myself). ...I have so much of what is supposed to make life good—a husband who loves me, two bright, promising children, a home in the country. I should be happy, but I'm nearly always miserable. I hide. I cower. I'm afraid of people. My profession (nursing) terrifies me. I avoid unpleasant confrontations at all costs.

In addition to their awareness of being fearful and aroused, many shy people are all too aware that they suffer deficits in social skills. They lack adequate verbal skills necessary to feel comfortable in conversations. They lack assertiveness skills to negotiate interpersonal conflicts and to initiate action in their best interests. Finally, they may be insensitive to the nuances of appropriate social behavior needed, for example, to get someone's attention, to interrupt effectively, to h indie compliments, or to know when to strike before the iron gets too hot.

As parents, teachers, or supportive friends, we can have a considerable impact in turning shyness around. We do so by modeling appropriate social behaviors, giving the shy lots of practice in socializing, providing constructive, nonthreatening feedback that helps refine the shy person's social skills, and most of all by rewarding all attempts at trying to be a social being.

We have found that while some shys are obviously so, even to a casual observer, others have learned to conceal their inner torment from the most careful scrutiny. These two basic types of shy people, *shy introverts* and *shy extroverts* essentially generalize the experience and capture our interest. It is from these two types of shy people that we have learned the most about what it *feels* like to be shy, and we have seen that their feelings are quite similar despite the fact that their public selves are so dramatically different.

Shy introverts are those people whose shyness—like starched underwear—cannot be concealed. A shy student majoring in speech pathology describes the feelings and symptoms of extreme shyness most succinctly.

"I was doing research on stuttering. While reviewing passages describing the emotional trauma and juxtaposed feelings of the stutterer (the *desire* to speak, and the *fear* of speaking) I was constantly reminded of similar fears, anticipatory avoidance behaviors, and many other association factors involved in stuttering that I could apply to my own experience with shyness.

"I remember thinking, as I would read various avoidance characteristics, how similar these fears and anxieties are to my own.

"For example, I anticipate that I'm going to blush when I talk, therefore I enter a conversation with anxiety. When I actually speak, the anxiety has become physiological—my heart races, I perspire—then I think to myself that I must be blushing already; then I blush—even if I wasn't blushing before, or blush *more* if I was!

"This is so similar to the anticipation-anxiety-stutter behavior of the stutterer. In increasing my embarrassment because I'm blushing, I think I appear awkward to the listener and am making him or her feel awkward. Finally the whole situation snowballs into: 1) confusion on my part because by now I'm concentrating on my (hated) blushing, and 2) confusion and

either impatience, no respect for what I'm saying (mumbling, by now), or pity—I can see it in their eyes just as a stutterer can see the pity, shock, or horror in the eyes of his listener—on the listener's part because they can see I am uncomfortable and unable to express myself (because all I want by then is to crawl into a hole!)."

In addition to the abject misery in this sort of situation, clearly, we can see that the shy person winds up on both the receiving and giving ends when it comes to rejection. Ultimately he or she is rejected, and somewhere in the whole process withdraws into shyness, thus rejecting whoever it might be who is attempting to listen or reach out. Not surprising then, is their reluctance to take risks, to try new things. Fear of failure (which can run the gamut from a difficult social encounter to learning a new sport) is so great that many shy children stay locked in place, never giving themselves the freedom to find out how well they might be able to perform socially, academically, or creatively. So they don't learn how in the only way one can—through practice, trial and error, and success.

Shy extroverts, on the other hand, manage to find the words in most situations, respond warmly to other people by smiling, laughing, making eye contact, giving compliments, and thus do a pretty good job of hiding their shyness from others. So successful are they, that often their best friends don't know that they experience many of the same sensations and fears that shy introverts do. Most of the time they are able to transcend their shyness and step into the role of the not-shy person. One rather vivacious eighteen-year-old described what it is like to be a shy extrovert this way:

"Many times in unfamiliar situations or when I'm with people I either don't know or hold in awe, my heart races so much I worry that people can actually see it pounding in my chest. My mouth goes dry, my hands get clammy, but all the while I manage to talk and smile because I certainly don't want any-

one to know that I'm shy. I keep trying, and can usually put up a good front, because I really do like other people, and as uncomfortable as it can be, I like to be around them.

"Sometimes when I walk into a room full of people, not only do I tremble, but I actually get dizzy. Sometimes I decline a cup of coffee because I'm afraid my shaking will cause me to spill it.

"The most embarrassing thing I do is that when I'm introduced to new people, the first thing that happens is that I forget their names simply because I'm so preoccupied with what sort of an impression I'm making."

Shy extroverts are at their best when they can play well-rehearsed roles in clearly defined situations, and especially when they are in the driver's seat. Actors, politicians, college lecturers, reporters, TV talk-show hosts are more often of this breed than one would suspect. They create the illusion of "doing naturally" what takes a lot of practice and concentrated effort (and maybe a stiff drink or two). Their shyness expresses itself when they leave the stage, or the red recording light goes off and they, too, must deal with the spontaneity and unplanned give-and-take of everyday encounters with ordinary people.

Shy extroverts make us aware of a special aspect of shyness, the separation of public self from one's "real," private self. Carol Burnett steps into a variety of not-shy roles with a unique style that wins her top awards as an outstanding performer. But give her a defective product to return or a cocktail party filled with strangers and she is the first to admit her shyness bugaboo intrudes to make her uncomfortably awkward. Former President Carter and Rosalyn Carter have both testified publicly how much they disliked campaigning because they are both shy. The list of shys seems endless, each day we add one more shy celebrity to it, including John Travolta; the late Jimi Hendrix; Charlton Heston; Loni Anderson, who on TV is Jennifer, the sexy WKRP receptionist; and Michael Jackson of the Jackson Five who says he is shy in private but comfortable

on stage. In an interview with Johnny Carson, Mike Wallace touched on the private shyness of this very successful, public person.

MW: There's a stereotype of Carson. You know there is.

JC: Well, what is it?

MW: It is icewater in his veins...

JC: I had that taken out years ago. I went to Denmark and had that done. It's all over now.

MW: Shy, defensive...

JC: Probably true. I can remember when I was in high school. If I pulled out my high school annual book and read some of the things. People might say, oh, he's con ceited, he's aloof. Actually, that was more shy. See, when I'm in front of an audience, it's a different thing. If I'm in front of an audience, I can feel comfortable.

MW: Why?

JC: I'm in control.

MW: *(Voice over)* That's a key to Carson. Control. Profes sionally, he insists upon it. Socially, he can't demand it so he retreats. He's uncomfortable. And the fact is he is shy.

JC: There's Carson the performer and there's Carson the private individual and I can separate the two.

Origins of Shyness

Some psychologists point to a genetic component in shyness. Within the first week of life, babies appear to differ in their emotionality, some cry a lot and are easily distressed. In addition, young children exhibit temperamental differences in their sociability that may develop into rather fixed patterns of social behavior. Those with more "sensitive" nervous systems, the argument goes, would overreact to threats. Cautious approach to, and ready retreat from threatening social situations would then develop in these children as ways of coping with their greater degree of anxiety.

The supporting evidence for an inherited origin of shyness is indirect and not very conclusive. Babies do indeed differ in how emotional and socially responsive they are, but it has not been shown that those who *are* more "sensitive" become shy as children or adults, while their thick-skinned, smiling siblings become the assertive kids on the block.

Learned social experiences can shape most genetically de-termined patterns of behaviors. Smiling babies get smiled at, picked up, and fussed over more than do sullen or placid ones. Sociable children are more fun to be with because they are re-sponsive to the attention they get. They get more social rewards and warm strokes because they give more to peers and adults.

Contained in the belief that there is a genetic component to shyness is the fairly widespread notion that shyness is inher-ited. Indeed, there is suggested evidence that shyness runs in families; at least one of the parents of a shy child is also likely to be shy. However, in those same families, there is as much chance that other children will not be shy. But the problem lies in the difficulty of separating the contribution of inherited predispositions toward shyness in a particular child from the learned consequences of family, school, work, and cultural ex-periences that are shyness producing regardless of the child's heredity.

From our research we've seen there are a number of differ-ent origins of shyness rooted in early childhood experiences, and, in how such experiences are perceived and interpreted by the individual. Some shy children report specific failures in social settings; difficulties in school; unfavorable comparisons with older siblings, relatives, or peers. Others, of all ages, suf-fer from the loss of usual social supports that results from fre-quent family moves out of the neighborhood or from sudden changes in social bonding due to divorce, death, going off to a new school, and so forth.

Where parents provide poor models from which to learn both the joys of being outgoing as well as some of the basic so-

cial skills essential to effective interactions, their "socially dis-advantaged" children are likely to be more shy than not. This seems to be the case with children born in the United States whose parents are from cultures that downplay public displays of affection, emotion, and active discussion and debate between parents and children.

Sheer lack of experience in social settings contributes to shyness. Living in isolated areas or being raised in restricted environments that deny access to a variety of social experiences makes for awkwardness and fear of the unknown. For example, being alone with someone of the opposite sex is one of the most potent elicitors of shyness from adolescence through old age—but not among young children. The reason is obvious: People of different sexes are separated and kept apart by a host of societal devices prior to the onset of puberty. The other sex is thus not only "different," but an alien species about whom we know little. For some parents who want to keep the natural interest between the sexes at bay as long as possible (or until marriage unites them), the admonition is: "Better shy now than sorry later!"

It has repeatedly amazed us how many shy people can pinpoint the day, place, and culprit responsible for pinning the shyness label on them. Sometimes the child will adopt the label as self-descriptive because it must be so if authoritative dad or all-knowing teacher says so. Sometimes shyness will be accepted as preferable to other labels that might account for why the child did not respond appropriately, such as "lazy," "dumb," or "unloving."

Another factor that quite likely tips low self-esteem in the shyness direction: shame. The list of things over which one can feel shame is endless: unsatisfactory personal appearance, bad habits, peculiar family members (like a Billy Carter in the closet), to name just a few. Shame gives people something to hide, something over which to feel self-conscious. Which might come first, shame or shyness? Perhaps they arrive together. One woman told us that she had been shy all of her life and

for as long as she can remember her grandmother always reprimanded her with the words, "Shame on you" or "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," for virtually any act of misbehavior or failure to perform well.

In any event, our research bears out that in the culture in which shyness is the most prevalent—Japan, with about 60 percent of those surveyed saying they are shy—shame is used as a tool for getting people to perform or behave the way society says they "should." Typically, the Japanese grow up with it deeply impressed on them that they are not to bring disgrace to the family—and "disgrace" may be seen in not performing well in school, making an error in a Little League game, or any failure at all. In this regard, there is an important comparison between the cultural values of Japan, and Israel—where shyness is least prevalent in any country we've studied. In Japan, failure falls entirely upon the shoulders of the person who erred, while his or her success gets credited to parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, or Buddha. Such a system suppresses individual risk-taking and solitary initiative.

Israeli children typically experience exactly the opposite child-rearing practices. Any success is attributed personally to the individual, while failures are externalized, blamed on inadequate teaching, unfair competition, prejudice, or whatever. There are rewards for trying to achieve something as well as for its attainment, with few, if any, sources of punishment for failure. The Israeli child has nothing to lose by trying and everything to gain. So why not take a chance? The Japanese child who has little to gain from trying and much to lose, holds back, defers, and passes up the chance.

In our culture, children raised under parental values that approximate those of the Japanese, will avoid situations of uncertainty or novelty and take few chances in social settings. These, as we have seen, and will discuss again later, are hallmarks of the shy person's approach to life.

We believe that shyness is, ultimately, caused by a combination of feelings of low self-worth, labeling, and shame. And

when all of these factors are present in the extreme, the consequences can be devastating. An example can be seen in Sarah, a college student who traveled from Oregon to Palo Alto in an effort to get into Stanford University to be near the Shyness Clinic (which she felt was her last hope).

When we first met Sarah, she sat in the office with her shoulders protectively slumped forward, her head down, her long hair covering her face, and not only did she not make eye contact, she kept her eyes closed. When we asked her to tell us about her shyness, she muttered that she couldn't. We continued to try to prod her into talking to us, but she would only mumble, sometimes incoherently. Finally, because we were getting nowhere, we suggested that she talk into a tape recorder, and left her alone in the office. Playing back the tape, which took Sarah nearly an hour to falteringly record, this is what we heard:

"I'm wasting tape. . . . *(four full minutes of silence)*

"It's very hard for me to make eye contact with people because . . . because . . . all my life it's been hard to communicate with people, you know, make eye contact with them...my mother, you know, says . . . it's the way my personality was . . . . And growing up not having a friend, you know...any really good friends.

"The reason I make very little sense to people...when I look at people. . . I can't think straight and I really can't talk very well. I feel nobody would like me because I don't, you know, have very much going for me. . . . I'm not loud, not vivacious... and I don't know if I can do anything that well...be an asset to other people.

"It's just that I can't . . . I just feel that I . . . that... I can't get my thoughts together. . . . 'm nervous. . .l ike now, you know, and I'm not making very much sense. I feel like a damn fool. . . . I wonder if there's any hope for me. I'm trying. I made an ass out of myself coming here to Stanford trying to get help. I can't go on like this. Part of me wants friends and the other part of me is frightened. . . . I don't know if they'll accept me. . . .

I don't think I'm worth accepting. Because you know . . . I've decided to fight . . . for a change . . . for something. I've never done it before in my life. . . . I just hope it will work out for me.

"I'm feeling a little more relaxed now. . . . I'll try to make more sense.

"All my life growing up and having an older sister who was very extroverted . . . it was very hard to grow up under that. Everybody always praised her . . . it made me feel inferior. Then having to have a brother who's the same way . . . makes you feel like you're sandwiched in between the two of them. Kinda weird. Then having a father who abuses . . . I could never feel secure in that house because he'd come home and be in a violent mood . . . he didn't even have to be drinking when he'd get violent . . . when he drank, he'd get more violent. I never felt secure. He was always saying, you know, I was no good, that I should never have been born, that I was an accident . . . and he didn't want a second child and then *I* came along. My father never let me forget that.

"My mother . . . she was better in that she always tried to make me feel welcome in the house. [But it still sounds like Sarah was at best a guest.] She always felt that I shouldn't be blamed for . . .

"The teachers were, you know, always picking on me. When I was in elementary school I always had one or two really good friends. . . . One teacher . . . she used to ask these really bitchy kids to make friends with me. I couldn't respond to them. They were so nasty all the time. The teachers always used to single me out. . . because I didn't have many friends. I was always being sent to the school psychologist."

From this, and from subsequent conversations with Sarah (which gradually we were able to ease her into), it was obvious that Sarah's self-esteem had been destroyed. And yet, the home environment was only *one* factor in the making of Sarah's debilitating shyness.

Other important factors, Sarah told us, included having to

wear thick glasses and ugly orthopedic shoes—and "walking funny"—all of which made her feel extremely inferior and self-conscious. And after Sarah started school, her first-grade teacher made it a practice to draw attention to her problems with her feet by forcing her to get up in front of the class and "walk right," which provided her classmates with a "comedy act," and Sarah a jeering audience. In a very classic experience, Sarah graduated from being the family scapegoat to being teacher's scapegoat, a role she was to play many times over the years.

Certainly Sarah's parents set her up, but the important thing to remember when looking at the role they played is that *they had many accomplices.*

Far less guilty parents than Sarah's blame themselves if their children are shy. While it is obviously true that shyness can sometimes be traced to the home environment, there are, as we have thus far seen, other causes.

Those most vulnerable to shyness, we have found, are children who relate well to adults but not to their peers, gifted children, only children, children mature beyond their years, those who live in isolated environments (rural and unsafe urban areas), nonathletic boys, and others who see themselves as significantly different. And we have found that shyness often surfaces when parents divorce or when some other crisis occurs in a family. Being put into a highly competitive, achievement-oriented college setting can weaken all but the best laid foundations of self-worth. Many college students report becoming more shy as a consequence of being a residential student at a top-flight college.

Shyness Elicitors

Just as there is a diversity of origins that predispose someone to be shy, there are many specific situations that precipitate the shyness reaction. The kinds of people and social settings that trigger the shyness response can be summarized as follows:

Other people (in order of their potential to trigger shyness)
   1. strangers
   2. authorities by virtue of their knowledge
   3. members of the opposite sex
   4. authorities by virtue of their role
   5. relatives and foreigners
   6. elderly people (for the young)
   7. friends
   8. children (for older people)
   9. parents
   10. siblings (least of all)

The underlying principle appears to be that shyness is elicited most by those who are perceived as different, relatively powerful, controlling desired resources, or familiar enough to be critically evaluative.

Situations (in order of their potential to trigger shyness)
   1. where I am the focus of attention—large groups, as when giving a speech
   2. where I am of lower status
   3. requiring assertiveness
   4. new, in general
   5. where I am being evaluated
   6. of vulnerability (need help)
   7. one-to-one opposite sex interactions
   8. social, in general
   9. where I am the focus of attention—small groups
   10. part of a small, task group

Shy people begin to worry when they have to perform in unfamiliar situations where they are the object of attention and critical evaluation by others whom they perceive to be dominant or demanding.

Such circumstances arouse some anxiety in even confidently assertive people, but they recognize the anxiety as a cue to

exert more effort in order to manipulate the environment to make it work for them. Similarly, an athlete interprets the flow of adrenaline just before the contest begins as excitement and "getting up" for the challenge rather than as anxious concern over prospects of failing. Shyness tends to be maintained by the biased ways we have learned to interpret our reactions to situations that we often distort. Thus, a major strategy for treating shyness consists of restructuring those thoughts so that they lead to constructive coping actions instead of the paralysis of inaction.

What Shyness Can Do

Shyness does lots of bad things to people, young and old.

• It makes it difficult to meet new people or enjoy potentially good experiences.

• Shyness prevents people from speaking up for their rights and expressing their own opinions and values. The shy are more conforming and less likely to challenge oppressive rules and authorities.

• It limits positive evaluations by others of one's real personal strengths.

• It encourages self-consciousness and excessive preoccupation with one's reactions, to the exclusion of concern for others.

• Shyness makes it hard to think clearly and communicate effectively, thus causing learning difficulties in schoolchildren.

• Negative feelings such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and loneliness typically accompany shyness.

• Shy people are more dependent than others on, and vulnerable to, peer pressure, which, in the instance of young people, makes them susceptible to pressures to smoke, drink, use dope, be unwillingly promiscuous, and even to join cults.

• Shy people tend to bottle up their emotions, which not only can deprive them of the warmth and intimacy with oth-

ers we all need, but can also lead them to suppress their anger until they explode—sometimes violently.

• Shy children are reluctant to ask questions, seek clarification, or ask for help in school when they need it.

• Shy people of all ages are frequently misunderstood. As the poet Tennyson noted, *"Shy she was, and I thought her cold."* They may be seen as disinterested in what someone may be saying to them, or unfriendly, or untrustworthy for not being able to look other people in the eye. If also attractive, the shy are judged to be condescending and rejecting of others.

• When the symptoms are functioning at full throttle, the shy person may remember past experiences with embarrassment and worry in anticipation about future goofs. The present—at least the social present with its chance to enjoy the moment—becomes virtually nonexistent. Nearly 10 percent of the shy are shy even when they are alone.

• With all of this self-preoccupation, shy people don't tune in appropriately to what is happening at the time and, thus, often don't hear accurately. A good example of this is that shy people frequently forget a person's name immediately after being introduced to someone new. And the inability to concentrate on the present and accurately keep track of who is saying what, makes it difficult to think clearly or express oneself effectively.

• Friendships with one's peers are not only pleasant, but research has shown that they are vital to the emotional growth and health of a child. When shyness prevents children from having friends—which it can do—it is then damaging to a child's emotional health.

Our primary concern is to help you to minimize the effects of shyness that may keep your children from reaching their full potential as human beings. Even when children are only moderately shy, they still miss out on valuable social experiences. And, when shyness is really severe, living in that psychological prison can ruin a life.

Sarah is just one example of how much can be done for shy

children. She not only made it through the interview with the Admissions officer, but she has been accepted as a transfer student to the university of her choice. And for the first time in her life she has a number of friends whose caring about her has taught her to smile, to look into their eyes, and to enjoy life and reach for something more. She's still quite shy, but she's not the same painfully shy student who came all the way from Oregon for help. To use her words, "After I was here for two weeks my whole life started to turn around because I found people who cared about me." Yes, it turned around because people cared enough to help Sarah make that happen for herself and because of her own inner strength.

Sarah is an inspiration to all of us—parents, teachers, concerned humans—to do whatever we can to help our children conquer shyness.