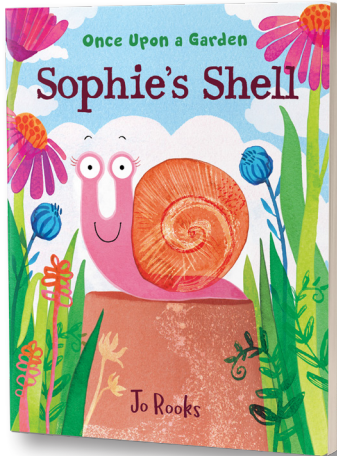




Four Ways to Support Your Shy Child

by Jo Rooks



Part of living a full life involves having new experiences. New experiences help us grow and develop as a person, gain confidence, and build self-esteem. Whether it's starting a new job, taking up a new hobby, or meeting new people, most of us are familiar with a feeling of shyness or anxiety that can be stirred up within even the most extroverted personalities.

Sometimes shyness can affect us in all sorts of negative ways. It's important to let our kids know that we all feel this emotion from time to time, and that there are lots of strategies to help us cope with new experiences without being overcome with anxiety.

Shyness is the main theme of *Sophie's Shell*. Sophie is a happy snail who wants to learn more about the world around her. In fact, she is counting down the days before she can start school. When she gets to school though, that all seems to change. Sophie's shy feeling is so strong that she has to keep popping back into her shell. POP!

Parents may also identify with this. Many have had the experience of taking an excited child to a birthday party, but upon arrival, they could hardly look up, didn't want to play, dance, or join in with the games, and just clung to their leg for the entire time. As a parent, you can feel surprised and frustrated and want to say, "Just go and enjoy yourself!", "Don't be shy!", "Speak up!", but these reactions won't help your child or you.

How You Can Help

Don't draw attention to it

In *Sophie's Shell*, Sophie has many episodes of feeling shy. This is often because people are paying lots of attention to her, even if it's for positive things like admiring her beautiful art. Adults can help children when they are feeling shy by simply carrying on calmly and not drawing attention to it. Discreetly asking other adults to do the same can also help.

Everyone feels shy sometimes, even grown ups

Let your child know that everyone can feel shy in certain situations, and that it's not something to feel ashamed of. Shyness can make us feel uncomfortable: sometimes Sophie has "a wobbly feeling in her tummy." Share with your child times when you have felt shy, how you coped with it, and how the feeling went away.

Little by little

With all experiences, the more familiar you are with a new situation, the easier it becomes and the less shy you feel. This means being patient and believing that being in new situations will get easier.

- Before a new experience, talk to your child about where they are going and how many people might be there.
- Suggest a way to make a new friend, such as smiling and saying, "Hi."
- Arrive at a party early, so there are fewer people. This can help your child get used to the environment without them feeling they are arriving to lots of new faces.
- Bring a conversation piece. Encourage your child to bring something along to the gathering (a gift, a stuffed animal for a young child, etc.) that makes them feel more comfortable and provides something to talk about.
- You could also ask to help set up. This will empower your child and focus them on an activity before the event begins.

This will prepare your child a little bit better for the new experience. If they join in and relax, praise them and tell them how proud you are of them. If they don't join in, try not to make a big deal of it, and try again next time. Each experience can help to build your child's self-esteem and confidence for next time.

Smile

If a child is looking worried, sometimes it's a natural reaction to mirror that worried expression, but smiling can give the reassurance your child needs. When Sophie met Stanley, he let her know that he understood how she was feeling: "Sometimes I feel shy too." Then he helped take her mind off it by asking, "Want to hear a joke?" Don't forget that a hug and laughter are always great ways to refocus your child's attention on something positive.

Most people feel a bit anxious in new social situations. Help your child cope with shyness and build positive experiences by letting them know that we all feel that way sometimes, and sharing strategies to manage their stress.