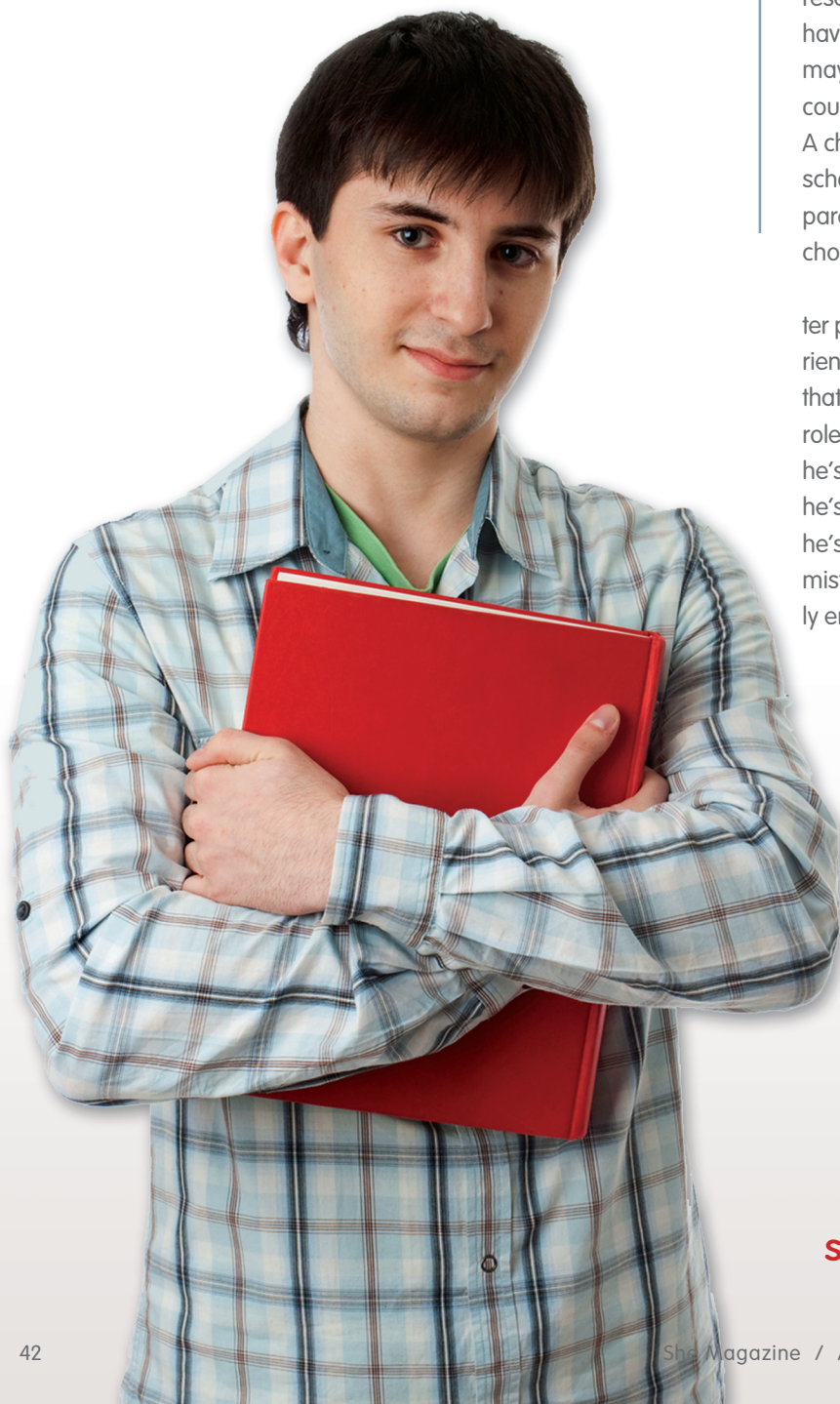


Dear Dr. Avie,

First, thank you for your column. I read it every month; and if I can't use the advice you offer in a particular issue, I almost always know someone who can! My problem is that I have an extremely shy sixteen-year-old son. I always felt he would outgrow it; but, it seems to be getting worse. His shyness prevents him from speaking up in class and also from talking to girls and making friends. He is sweet and likable (and this is not just coming from Momma, others feel the way about him), but he doesn't see himself that way. I really believe it all stems from low self-esteem, which makes me wonder what I did wrong. Do you think he has already passed the point of outgrowing his shyness? Or, is this something more serious? Should I try to get him professional help, or am I making too much out of it?

~ Frustrated Mom in Mullins



Dear Frustrated,

Let's look at the good news first. You and your friends agree your son is a likable young man with a sweet demeanor. (Just as a sideline, do you call him "sweet"? If so, that's NOT a good thing. No young man wants to be called "sweet" by his mother!) That would suggest he has not grown in a family culture of criticism, which is a major cause of shyness – it's hard to feel comfortable being outgoing if you've grown up being demeaned. The attributes you've noted in your son are an excellent start in helping him become a quality man. So, good work!

Each infant has a temperament type that is biologically based and accounts for somewhere between ten to twenty percent of the child's eventual personality. Following that bit of genetic encoding (i.e., nature), there are myriad other influences that shape the developing personality (i.e., nurture). Shyness, in particular, is very often evident in early childhood – even before the start of kindergarten. So, while it is best to address this patterning sooner rather than later, it is certainly not too late for your son's situation.

To help you determine the contributing factors to your son's shyness, let's look at the main culprits. A major contributor to a child's behavioral style is what we call modeling. Basically, this is copying the way others perform. So if either you or his father tends to be reserved, that could be a significant part of the problem. Social anxiety in a parent can also have an impact. If, for instance, the mother feels uncomfortable in social circumstances, she may tend to keep her child out of social endeavors because it is more comfortable for her. This could, of course, be a dynamic with the father, as well. Trust can also play into the dynamic. A child who doesn't feel trusted can be very reserved. Developmentally, a child in elementary school needs to gain confidence in his own industry – his own ability to get things done. If a parent is too demanding, has unrealistically high expectations, or second-guesses the child's choices, then the kid can feel s/he doesn't know how to make good decisions.

In a similar fashion, a parent can be overly protective. This is what we call a helicopter parent – one who is always hovering over the child and not allowing him to learn and experience for himself. A different take on this is a parent who is overly aggressive. In living under that oppression, a child sees others as hostile and to be avoided. Shame can also play a big role. Has your child made decisions for which he's been made to feel ashamed? It could be he's done something stupid and has been treated in a way that hurt his confidence. Maybe he's been painfully embarrassed by responses to sexual self-exploration? Think about how he's been treated in response to mistakes. Perfectionist parents can be very hard on a child's mistakes. Finally, how is affection handled in the family? Has he been affirmed and physically encouraged with hugs, pats on the back, and the like?

You are right to think about how to help your son. It is not too late, and help should be given. So, think about these possibilities. If something is in need of obvious change, then set about to make things better. If it all still seems a mystery, then it's time to call your family's psychologist and make an appointment. In psychotherapy, the root of his self-esteem issues can be discovered (and more problematic issues ruled out) and work to repair his sense of self can be undertaken. He can be assisted in learning social skills and gain the confidence he'll need to be able to overcome this life-limiting problem.

Oh, and thank you for your kind words about the column. I appreciate the support, and so does *She*!

~ Dr. Avie

**To have your question featured in Ask Dr. Avie,
send an e-mail to askdravie@shemagazine.com.**