

The special child

Shyness

Excessiveness and Lack of

Shyness as a character trait is generally praiseworthy. Our most beloved Prophet Muhammad (May Allah bless him and give him peace) said: “Shyness never brings about but that which is good.”

The right amount of shyness stands between a person and lewd or indecent behavior. Also in the general sense, shyness would prevent a person from disobeying his creator, his parents and teachers and violating the rights of others.

All of these are good attitudes, which may be unfortunately lacking in many of our kids raised in the west.

They are taught that shyness is a disease which requires treatment. The shy kid is ridiculed by his friends (one of the harms of peer pressure).

Yet, on the other end, excessiveness in anything is harmful, and if shyness is excessive, then it is called social anxiety, and then it needs attention.

The shyness that the Prophet referred to here above is in Arabic (haya') and that doesn't entail (khajal) which is timidity or social anxiety and fear of performance in front of others.

So how do we sort out the praiseworthy shyness from the crippling social anxiety? And when is shyness important and when is it part of the customs and traditions of people?

- The following hadeeth and its commentary may explain some of the differences between shyness and social anxiety: `Imran b. Husayn once related that Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) said: “Shyness is all good.” Basheer b. Ka'b, upon hearing this from `Imran, said: “In some books we find that some aspects of it include tranquility and dignity of spirit to Allah, but also that some of it is weakness.” This angered `Imran who said: “You see me relating to you what Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) said, and you raise objections to it?” Then `Imran repeated what he said and Basheer repeated what he said, and `Imran became angry again. [*Saheeh Muslim*] Ibn Rajab, commenting on this incident, writes: “The matter is as `Imran had said. The praiseworthy shyness that the Prophet (peace be upon him) spoke of is none other than the disposition of character that encourages good actions and discourages bad ones. As for the weakness and incapacity that bring about insufficiency in honoring the rights of Allah or the rights of His creatures, this has nothing at all to do with shyness. It is nothing other than weakness, inability, and disgrace.”¹

❖ The following may be signs of social anxiety, not the praiseworthy shyness:

- Covering the face with the hands for boys.
- Holding the head down and not making eye contact.²

¹ Reported by Muslim. Translation from www.islamtoday.net ; The Timid child, by Shaykh Salman al-'Odah.

² If the child is doing this with members of the other gender, s/he may be copying her/his parents, which is a good sign.

- Inability to carry out a conversation or greet the guests.
- Stuttering when talking (even though it may be a separate condition).
- Inability to perform tasks, particularly in the presence of strangers.
- Separation anxiety, particularly when the child gets separated from the mother (depending on the stage of development, it may be a healthy sign or one that is concerning. Generally speaking it should start to significantly diminish by six years of age.)

❖ Some of the main reasons behind this condition include:

- Extremes of parenting (too firm or spoiling).
- Lack of interactions with society, which is the case with many of our kids, because of the lack of extended families and isolation.
- Chaotic home environment.
- Being unforgiving of the mistakes will make the child timid to try.
- Bullying at school, or biased treatment by the teachers (something many of our kids suffer from, because of their many differences from the rest; sometimes though because of the child's hypersensitivity)
- Frequent moving, which may make the child unable to settle emotionally and acquaint himself with a certain routine.

❖ Suggested treatment:

- Balanced parenting, in which extremes are avoided.
- Forgive your child's mistakes to allow him to try.
- Boost his or her self confidence through encouragement.
- Allow them to socialize, by taking them frequently to the masjid.
- A trip back home may give the child a boost of confidence, when he sees himself to be normal and not "different".
- If the condition is extreme, with physical symptoms such as sweating, fast heartbeats, cold extremities, shaking and extreme crying, you may seek help from a trustworthy pediatrician. (most of the cases don't require medication)