

# The Impact of Shyness on Academic Performance

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## Shyness and School Experience

Shyness greatly influences the schooling experience, contributing to a cycle of setbacks that can result in decreased academic performance. At school, students are frequently evaluated and required to interact with others—situations that may elicit discomfort and anxiety. Shy individuals are those who undergo a worried fixation on themselves or who experience distress in social situations (Jones et al., 2014). Shy students show heightened sensitivity to others' perceived judgements compared to unshy students (Jones et al., 2014), and as a result, the schooling experience may be more distressing and stressful for shy students than unshy students. Additionally, their anxiety over perceived judgments may discourage them from seeking help or clarification, leading to gaps in understanding. Therefore, shyness may negatively impact students' academic performance.



Art by Attia Chaudhary

## Challenges in Forming Relationships

Shy students' trouble forming relationships at school impacts their performance. Their distress during social interactions may hinder relationships they are able to form in the classroom, leaving them with few companions. Having positive peer relationships is associated with better performance at school.

(Zhang et al., 2017), as these positive bonds with other students may encourage individuals to ask for help if they are struggling or allow them to feel comfortable participating in group activities. This means they can engage more in the classroom and are more motivated to participate. Conversely, a lack of positive relationships could lead to decreased academic performance as this support system does not exist (Zhang et al., 2017). This puts shy students at an elevated risk for worse performance at school since it is harder for them to form these relationships.

### **Impact of Teachers' Treatment**

Teachers perceive shy students to be less intelligent than their unshy counterparts (Hughes & Coplan, 2010) and expect them to score lower marks in standardized tests (Coplan et al., 2011). Through interactions with teachers, students unconsciously perceive and internalize their expectations (Chandrasegaran & Padmakumari, 2018). These lower expectations may discourage shy students from putting in effort at school, resulting in poor performance. Moreover, shy students are also less likely to have

close relationships with their teachers and have fewer interactions with them (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). This lack of closeness contributes to feelings of insecurity in the classroom, resulting in further withdrawal and less engagement and achievement (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). These factors initiate a cycle in which teachers' attitudes and treatment towards shy students cause them to feel discouraged and disconnected at school, thereby resulting in lower performance.

### **Evidence of Lower Academic Achievement**

Shy students perform worse at school than unshy students. When tested at the end of the second grade, children that were shy in kindergarten had worse reading skills compared to unshy children (Hall et al., 2016). Over these three years between kindergarten and the second grade, they were not able to pick up the same reading skills as their unshy counterparts (Hall et al., 2016), indicating a shortcoming in their ability to grasp and retain material. Aside from reading abilities, shy children also show lower achievement in mathematic skills. Preschool children high in so-

cial withdrawal were found to have poorer mathematical skills when tested using standardized tests (Dobbs et al., 2006). Early math abilities are developed through informal exploration and interactions with the environment, therefore signifying that shy children experience shortcomings in their early explorations with their environment (Dobbs et al., 2006). These studies show that children who are shy face setbacks during their early educational experiences resulting in lower academic achievement.

### **Supporting Shy Students**

Schools should implement strategies to facilitate shy students' learning. Shy children face greater setbacks in school to perform well, and these obstacles have consequences for their professional futures. For example, a student with lower grades may be passed up on opportunities to participate in projects or competitions, thus offered less chances to build or showcase their skills and abilities. Students with lower grades are less likely to get accepted into their first-choice university and may have to attend lower-ranked institutions that are viewed less favourably. This puts

shy students at an unfair disadvantage when compared to their non-shy counterparts and has the power to change the trajectory of their lives. Therefore, school settings must attempt to reduce this inequality and enable shy children to succeed the same as unshy students. Teachers can facilitate shy students' learning by guiding them in reaching achievable goals, such as completing assignments or participating in class discussions at their own pace. Additionally, providing a safe environment that offers emotional support can help decrease distress, allowing shy students to focus more effectively on their studies and engage with their peers (Nyborg et al., 2022). Although shy children suffer in academic performance, changes in the classroom can be implemented to allow them to thrive in the classroom and the future.

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