

Building social communication skills in shy children helps with peer likeability

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A new study by Yale-NUS College Assistant Professor of Social Sciences (Psychology) Cheung Hoi Shan has discovered that shy children with low English vocabulary skills, can still be popular among

their peers if they have high-functioning social communication skills that enable them to engage and interact well with their peers in social settings. Dr Cheung conducted the study involving 164 preschoolers between 52 and 79 months old in Singapore. She co-authored the paper with Associate Professor John Elliott from the Department of Psychology under the National University of Singapore's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The paper was recently published in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*.

Earlier studies found that shy [children](#) tend to be less well-liked among their peers. Researchers have tried to identify factors such as good [vocabulary](#) skills and [social communication skills](#), which can buffer the negative effects of child shyness and make shy children more well-liked by their peers. However, the interaction between these two factors and how they may have a combined effect on children was unknown.

Contrary to existing assumptions that shy children with low vocabulary skills struggle with peer likeability, Dr Cheung's research has shown that as long as a shy child is equipped with high functioning social skills and able to react well across different social situations, the child's poor vocabulary skills become inconsequential. This suggests that social communication skills have a buffering effect. Some examples of social communication skills include non-verbal communication (e.g. ability to recognise when other people are upset), inappropriate initiation (e.g. talking repetitively about something that no one is interested in), and use of context (e.g. ability to adapt and communicate based on situation and audience).

"Presumably, having a good expressive vocabulary, and by extension a good command of language, makes it easier for children to engage and interact with peers. However, we have found that the presence of a good vocabulary in a shy child offered no additional buffering effect for peer likeability if the child did not possess high-functioning social communication skills. Conversely, shy children with poor vocabulary

skills were assumed to be less likeable, but high-functioning social communication skills serve as an effective buffer against the presumed language disadvantage. The more shy a child was, the more pronounced the effect of social communication skills," Dr Cheung shared.

The findings for this study suggest that parents should consider placing more emphasis on developing a shy child's social communication skills, instead of only looking to expand their vocabulary. Traditionally, parents tend to focus on increasing a child's vocabulary as the way to improve a child's language and communication skills. However, it is high social communication skills, instead of good vocabulary, that appears to serve a protective function for shy children, helping to increase their peer likeability. The implications of the research are particularly relevant to families who live in Singapore's multilingual environment as the study included local bilingual or trilingual preschoolers.

Assoc Prof Elliott noted the impact of culture and the local context on the study. "It turns out that being a shy child in Singapore is not quite the negative thing it is often thought to be in places like the United States, which have strongly individualistic cultures. In Singapore, it may be considered quite appropriate, and need not diminish the child's popularity among peers, if the child has good social communication skills," he pointed out.

"Social [communication](#) skills such as making eye contact, ability to adapt and communicate in different situations can be taught deliberately, instead of leaving children to observe and pick up these skills on their own. Parents of shy children may want to consider developing such skills in their children so that they can learn how to better engage with their peers, helping them to develop meaningful relationships despite their shyness," explained Dr Cheung.

Highlighting the potential for future research, Assoc Prof Elliott added,

"This finding is only one aspect of the research that Dr Cheung conducted. Patterns of parenting are not the same everywhere and we have shown that what counts as sensitive and appropriate parenting is quite hard to determine using assumptions and methods developed elsewhere. I hope the research can be taken forward in the direction of further investigating local parenting practice and its effect on child socialisation, while developing locally appropriate methods."

Dr Cheung conducted the study while she was a PhD candidate at the National University of Singapore, and has a long-standing interest in the study of parenting practices and their influence on children's social development. Her current work investigates cultural differences in parenting styles and practices, which have implications on the interpretation of parent-child relationship quality and consequently, children's development. Dr Cheung has also published another paper in *Child Development*, which argues that cultural context has significant impact on the measurement of maternal sensitivity, i.e. the extent to which mothers are able to perceive and interpret their child's signals accurately, and respond in a timely and appropriate manner. She found that it may not be effective for studies in Singapore to use the typical western scales to make these measurements, hence pointing to the need for more research to better understand parenting norms in the local context.

More information: Hoi Shan Cheung et al, Child shyness and peer likeability: The moderating role of pragmatics and vocabulary, *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/bjdp.12192](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12192)

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