

INSIGHTS

Parenting introverts and quiet kids



Many parents worry when their child is shy, quieter than others or not the outgoing type. The thought that their child may be a loner turns parents into social organisers who arrange playdates and parties or friendship coaches. They may upskill their kids to start conversations, manage conflict and play with others. This flurry of activity can be exhausting, and they cause a great deal of angst for kids. However, it may be that their child is introverted by nature, and they are trying to make them fit the extrovert mould.

It's genetic

Introverts are wired differently to extroverts. Introverts have closer links to the para-sympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for calm and relaxation, so they feel more at home in quieter, less stimulating environments. Extroverts, on the other hand, are more closely aligned with the sympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for high arousal levels, so they seek stimulating environments to keep their energy levels high.

Extroverts work hard to get their dopamine hits, those little shots of happiness the brain releases to reward behaviour and keep them coming back for more. Introverts, on the other hand, who only have to read a book to get a dopamine hit, feel more comfortable in low stimulus environments.

Birth order plays a role

While nature plays a huge part in temperament development, genetics can't claim all the credit for creating introverts and extroverts. In birth order studies, eldest borns repeatedly score higher on introversion than children in other birth order positions, while later-borns consistently lean towards extroversion. Being born last in a family usually means time alone is a rarity, while eldest children usually spend a great deal of time in their own company in the early formative years when personality is being shaped.

The world is skewed toward extroverts, so knowing how to raise introverts means that you may need to discard many parenting rules of thumb you've taken for granted. Here are some parenting ideas to get you started.

Welcome introspection

Introverts like to go within to process daily events and find solutions to their problems. In an era when we encourage kids to discuss rather than bottle problems up, introspection can be disconcerting for parents. But giving introverts space to think through adverse events before they seek help, enables them to get their thoughts in order and feel more in control of their lives. Welcome quiet times and remember that introverts need time to refresh and replenish away from the hustle and bustle of school and family life.

Provide silence and solitude

Extroverts like to keep company of others, while introverts like to keep their own company, or keep friendship circles small. Introverted kids appreciate quiet time and spaces away from others to recharge, reconnect and relax. This may seem strange to extroverted parents, or siblings who want to hang out or play with their siblings. Giving kids permission to seek solitude, balanced with activity to prevent brooding, is an introvert-friendly family habit.

Use stepladders not escalators

Extroverts tend to jump boots and all into new social situations. School camp coming up. *“Great. It’ll be fun.”* Family holiday approaching. *“Terrific! I hope we go where there’s heaps of other kids.”* Joining a new sports team. *“I can’t wait. I bet I’ll know heaps of kids already.”*

Introverts, on the other hand, are more tentative entering new social situations. School camp. *“I hope some of my friends are going.”* Family holiday. *“Who else will be there?”* Joining a new sports team. *“Will I know anyone?”*

Give introverts plenty of information about new situations and don’t expect them to immediately embrace the whole scenario. Give them time to make new friends and become comfortable in social situations.

Quietly celebrate quiet achievers

Introverts can easily feel that something is wrong with them. Mainstream entertainment and social media celebrates extroverts in all walks of life. Brain surgeons don’t receive standing ovations, yet they do their best work on their own. When introverts do well in any field shout it out (but quietly!) as they need someone to aspire to as much as extroverts.

Chess anyone?

Help your introverted child discover their strengths and interests and resist pushing them down common leisure paths such as sport or drama that may not hold strong appeal. When they join clubs and groups they may be really interested in, such as chess, crafts or reading, they will more than likely form friendships with like-minded souls... as birds of a feather really do flock together.

It’s a balancing act

Too much solitude can lead to depression so introverted children and teenagers need to be challenged at times to leave the comfort of their own company and spend time with friends, or even the rest of the family. Firm but gentle persuasion and nudging works better with introverts than heavy-handedness so work on your persuasion skills to ensure your introvert lives a socially balanced life.

In closing

Parenting introverts can be a challenge particularly if you are an extrovert yourself. Adopt the mindset that introversion is normal, indeed a strength, and put steps in place to help an introverted child feel both comfortable in their own skin and confident navigating the world at large.



Michael Grose

Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia’s leading parenting educators. He’s an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.