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Your Quiet Child

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In my 2012 TED Talk, I told the story of going off to summer camp for the first time at age nine. My mother had packed my bag full of books. Reading was our primary group activity—and I liked it that way. It gave us the animal warmth of sitting cozily with the family, and the freedom to roam around the adventure-land inside our own minds.

So it seemed natural to me that my new friends at camp would feel the same way. I pictured us stretched out cozily on our cots, reading books in our matching nightgowns.

Instead, on the very first day, we were met by a counselor who told us that camp spirit was very important and that we should all learn a cheer: “R-O-W-D-I-E, that’s the way we spell rowdy. Rowdie, rowdie, let’s get rowdie!”

I couldn’t understand why we were supposed to be so rowdy—and why we had to spell this word incorrectly. But I performed that cheer for the rest of the summer, as loudly as I could, and did my best approximation of a rowdy, gregarious camper. For the rest of my childhood, too, and well into my adult years, I tried to act like more of an extrovert than I really was. I even became a Wall Street lawyer for a while, instead of the author I had always longed to be—partly to prove to myself, and to the world, that I could thrive in an alpha environment.

But I came to believe that it was a big mistake to turn myself inside out instead of drawing on my own natural strengths. And I

saw that we are making this mistake as a society—in our homes, in our schools, and in our workplaces. Our institutions are increasingly designed for extroverts.

We are making a mistake: Our institutions are increasingly designed for extroverts.

I've since dedicated myself to empowering introverts for the benefit of us all. At our mission-based company Quiet Revolution, we're especially passionate about making sure that the next generation of introverted kids knows its own strength, and about giving parents and teachers the tools—such as online courses and website articles—they need to help their quiet children thrive.

Parenting a Quiet Child

Do you have a quiet child?

If the answer is yes (or if you are shy or introverted yourself), you're probably well aware of our society's deep bias against quiet.

But there is nothing wrong with your child. In fact, one out of every two or three people is introverted, including many business leaders (from Larry Page to Marissa Mayer), transformative leaders (from Mahatma Gandhi to Eleanor Roosevelt) and creative stars (from Steve Wozniak to Philippe Starck).

I believe that society is on the brink of change, and that we are poised for what I call a Quiet Revolution—in which the power of introverts will be unlocked for the benefit of us all.

In the meantime, however, here are ten tips for parenting your introverted child:

1. **Understand the difference between introversion and shyness.** Introversion is about the preference for quiet, calm environments; shyness is about the fear of social judgment. Sometimes they overlap, and the same person is both shy and

introverted. But you can be a shy extrovert (Barbra Streisand is a larger-than-life personality who suffered for decades from stage fright) or an introvert who is not shy at all (Bill Gates is quiet and self-contained but not particularly shy.) Many of us feel shy at one time or another. But our cultural bias is really against both shyness *and* introversion. This is why our work focuses on both types of children.

2. **Don't just accept your child for who she is; treasure her for who she is.** Shy or introverted children are often kind, thoughtful, focused, and very interesting company, as long as they're in settings that work for them.
3. **Introverted kids usually have the capacity to develop great passions.** Cultivate these enthusiasms. Intense engagement in an activity is a proven route to happiness and well-being, and a well-developed talent is a great source of confidence. Traditional childhood activities like soccer and piano may work well for some kids, but don't forget to look off the beaten path. You may find a chess club or a creative writing program that offers a fantastic community for cerebral kids.
4. **If you're an introvert who feels ashamed of your own personality traits, this is a good time to seek therapy or another form of counseling.** Do it for your child if not for yourself. He will pick up on your own poor self-image, and also its inevitable projections onto him. If you can't afford the time or money for therapy, here's a simple way to change how you feel about yourself: consider that the things you dislike in yourself are usually a package deal with the things you like best. For example, Elaine Aron, author of *The Highly Sensitive Person* and an introvert, says that her husband has always seen her as creative,

intuitive, and a deep thinker. Aron had been aware of these traits, but used to see them merely as “acceptable surface manifestations of a terrible, hidden flaw I had been aware of all my life.” It took her years to understand that the sensitive introvert and the deep thinker were one and the same person.

5. **If you're an introvert, try not to project your own history onto your child.** Your introversion may have caused you pain when you were younger. Don't assume that this will be the case for your child, or that she won't be able to handle the occasional sling or arrow. She can handle it, and she can thrive. The best thing you can do for her is take joy in her wonderful qualities, have confidence that those qualities will carry her far, and teach her the skills she needs to handle the challenging aspects of her nature.
6. **If your child is reluctant to try new things or meet new people, the key is gradual exposure.** Don't let him opt out, but do respect his limits, even when they seem extreme. Inch together toward the thing he's wary of. If it's the ocean waves, for, example, approach at his own pace. Let him know that his feelings are normal and natural, but also that there's nothing to be afraid of. When he takes social risks, let him know that you admire his efforts: “I saw you go up to those new kids yesterday. I know that can be difficult, and I'm proud of you.” Point out to him when he ends up enjoying things he thought he wouldn't like or that he was initially scared of. Eventually he will learn to self-regulate his feelings of wariness.
7. **If your child is shy, make sure you communicate to her that shyness is natural and normal and improves with time.** Did you know that 50% of the population feels shy sometimes?

Make sure your child knows this too! You don't want your child to experience her nervousness as a fixed trait, rather than as an emotion she can learn to control. When others call her "shy" in front of her (which they will), reframe it lightly. "Sophie is great at sussing out new situations." Tell your child lightly about the times you felt shy and what you did to overcome it.

8. **Get to social events, like birthday parties, early.** Let your child feel as if others are joining him in a space that he "owns," rather than having to break into a pre-existing group. Similarly, if he's nervous before school starts, bring him to see his classroom, meet his teacher, figure out where the bathroom is, and so on.
9. **Teach her to stand up for herself.** It's best to start young, if you can. If she looks distressed when another child takes her toy, take her aside afterwards and teach her to say "stop" in her loudest voice. Practice saying—shouting—"STOP." Make it a game. Be light about it, while letting her know that you understand her feelings. You can even try calling it speaking in her "parent voice"—firm and authoritative.
10. **If you have an "orchid child," you are very lucky:** If your child is "highly sensitive"—the term for kids who are sensitive to lights, sounds, emotional experiences, and/or new situations—then he probably fits into a category of children known as "orchid" children. This term derives from a groundbreaking new theory capturing the attention of research psychologists. It holds that many children are like dandelions, able to thrive in just about any environment. But others, including highly sensitive kids, are more like orchids. They wilt easily, but if they have good childhoods they can actually do better than dandelion

children. Multiple studies have found that they're often healthier, have better grades, enjoy stronger relationships, and so on. As one leading orchid theory researcher, Jay Belsky of the University of London, explained to me, the parents of orchid kids are very lucky because “the time and effort they invest will actually make a difference. Instead of seeing these kids as vulnerable to adversity, parents should see them as malleable—for worse, but also for better.”

Susan Cain is a writer and lecturer, and the author of Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking. She is a co-founder of Quiet Revolution, a company that offers services, online courses, and a global online community website to empower introverts (and their parents) in every aspect of their lives. www.quietrev.com.