

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator

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Helping shrinking violets to bloom

Self-consciousness is normal in girlworld, but you can help your daughter grow out of it

Article contributed by Dannielle Miller

Intense self-consciousness is a part of life in girlworld. Even an extroverted girl can have moments when she feels as if a spotlight is shining just on her and the whole world is staring at (what she perceives as) her flaws.

In my diary when I was 14, I lamented the fact that a plastic surgeon had told me he couldn't fix the scars I have on my neck and down one arm as the result of third-degree burns I received as a little girl... I wasn't self-conscious about those scars ... until I hit puberty. Then I wore long sleeves no matter how hot it was. I believed those scars meant I would never be loved.

Melodramatic? Sure, but that fear was painfully real at the time.

When a girl says she's going to "die" because she has to give a five-minute talk in class, it sounds like a total overreaction – but that may be how she truly feels. Some self-conscious girls blush. Some clam up to the point of seeming rude. Others underachieve so that they don't outshine their friends. They might apologise, or even get angry, when they receive a compliment. Binge drinking and other risky behaviour can also be misguided ways of handling social stress. This is all puzzling to adults – unless we remind ourselves what it was like to be a teenager, simultaneously wanting to stand out and fit in.

With all that we have learned and experienced as adults, there is much we can do to help shrinking violets bloom.

1. Know the power of your words. A friend of mine heard a teenage girl at a party wishing that she would stop growing as she didn't want to be "too tall". No adults spoke up to give her some perspective. In fact, one woman said, "Oh yes, you want to be able to wear high heels." The subtext: if you grow too tall, you'll tower over any potential date and will be doomed to a sad, lonely, high-heel-less spinsterhood. To that girl, I say: whether you're short or tall or somewhere in between, you are beautiful and you will be loved. To grown-ups, I say: we all have to be careful with our words.

2. Help her tackle shyness in small steps. You can eat something as big as an elephant if you take small enough bites. If your daughter finds social situations challenging, suggest she works on one thing, such as talking to new people. Next time she's in a social situation, she could try saying hello to just one person she hasn't met before. The more often she does it, the easier it will become.



3. Create opportunities to socialise. Provide your shrinking violet a non-stressful environment in which to get to know other girls and develop social skills. You might organise one-on-one opportunities for her to hang out with another girl at your place. Girl Guides and community groups are other great ways to gently introduce girls to social situations.

4. Help her be prepared. For girls who become anxious about public occasions, being fully prepared can be a real confidence booster, especially when giving a talk in class. For social events, some self-conscious girls find it helpful to visualise how they'd like the event to go and the kind of things they'd like to say and do.

5. Be a role model. Strong, confident role models can inspire girls to come out of their shell. Parents are the most important role models of all, so as well as encouraging her to find role models outside the home, it's important for you to look inwards, too. How do you respond when someone gives you a compliment? Do you sometimes struggle to find your voice to express your beliefs and feelings?

6. Encourage her to find her inner Amazon. I recommend that girls spend some quiet time visualising their inner Amazon, who is strong and powerful. Girls can then summon up their inner Amazon whenever their confidence gets wobbly. At the end of my book, *The Butterfly Effect*, I give a visualisation exercise that girls in our workshops find really empowering.

7. Celebrate difference. Our aim should be to support girls and help them develop the confidence to be themselves, not to force everyone to be outgoing. Some people are naturally quieter than others. If a girl is especially shy and quiet in class or is really struggling in the playground, then of course we need to help her develop the skills to contribute in class and in social groups – while always respecting individual differences.

Dannielle Miller – Parentingideas recognised expert
Dannielle Miller is a leader in the area of raising girls. She is the author of *The Butterfly Effect* and CEO of Enlighten Education. Dannielle is currently working on her second book, aimed at adolescent girls. She is a popular speaker at youth and education conferences and forums. Find out more at www.daniellemiller.com

Michael Grose Presentations
PO Box 167 Balmarring Vic 3926
p + 61 3 5983 1798
f (03) 5983 1722
e office@parentingideas.com.au

parentingideas.com.au
 parentingideas.co.uk
 parentingideas.co.nz
 facebook.com/michaelgroseparenting
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