

Shyness

1. If you suffer from shyness, you are not alone, for shyness is a universal phenomenon.¹ According to recent research, "close to 50 percent of the general population report that they currently experience some degree of shyness in their lives. In addition, close to 80 percent of people report having felt shy at some point in their lives" (Payne, par. 3).² As shyness is so prevalent in the world, it is not surprising that social scientists are learning more about its causes. They have found that shyness in an individual can result from both biological and environmental factors.

2. Recent research reveals that some individuals are genetically predisposed to³ shyness. In other words, some people are born shy. Researchers say that between 15 and 20 percent of newborn babies show signs of shyness: they are quieter and more vigilant. Researchers have identified physiological differences between sociable and shy babies that show up as early as two months. In one study, two-month-olds who were later identified as shy children reacted with signs of stress to stimuli such as moving mobiles⁴ and tape recordings of human voices; increased heart rates, jerky movements of arms and legs, and excessive crying. Further evidence of the genetic basis of shyness is the fact that parents and grandparents of shy children more often say that they were shy as children than parents and grandparents of non-shy children (Henderson and Zimbardo 6).⁵

3. However, environment can, at least in some cases, triumph over biology. A shy child may lose much of his or her shyness. On the other hand, many people who were not shy as children become shy as adults, a fact that points to environmental or experiential causes.

4. The first environmental cause of shyness may be a child's home and family life. Children who grew up with a difficult relationship with parents or a dominating older sibling are more likely to be inhibited⁶ in social interactions. Another factor is the fact that today's children are growing up in smaller and smaller families, with fewer and fewer relatives living nearby. Growing up in single-parent homes or in homes in which both parents work full time, children may not have the socializing experience of frequent visits by neighbors and friends. Because of their lack of social skills, they may begin to feel socially inhibited, or shy, when they start school (7).

5. A second environmental cause of shyness in an individual may be one's culture. In a large study conducted in several nations, 40 percent of participants in the United States rated themselves as shy, compared to 57 percent in Japan and 55 percent in Taiwan. Of the countries participating in the study, the lowest percentage of shyness was found in Israel, where the rate was 31 percent. Researchers Henderson and Zimbardo say, "One explanation of the cultural difference between Japanese and Israelis lies in the way each culture deals with attributing credit for success and blame for failure. In Japan, an individual's performance success is credited externally to parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, and others, while failure is entirely blamed on the person." Therefore, Japanese learn not to take risks in public and rely instead on group-shared decisions. "In Israel, the situation is entirely reversed," according to Henderson and Zimbardo. "Failure is externally attributed to parents, teachers, coaches, friends, anti-Semitism, and other sources, while all performance success is credited to the individual's enterprise." The consequence is that Israelis are free to take risks since there is nothing to lose by trying and everything to gain (10).

6. In addition to family and culture, technology may play a role as well. In the United States, the number of young people who report being shy has risen from 40 percent to 50 percent in recent years (10). The rising numbers of shy young people may be "due in part to the growing dependence on non-human forms of communication, coming about as a result of our huge advances in technology" (Payne, par. 4). Watching television, playing video games, and surfing the Web have displaced recreational activities that involve social interaction for many young people. Adults, too, are becoming more isolated as a result of technology. Face-to-face interactions with bank tellers, gas station attendants, and store clerks are no longer necessary because people can use machines to do their banking, fill their gas tanks, and order merchandise. College students take online telecourses. Telecommuters work at home, giving up daily contact with coworkers. Everyone texts, e-mails, and converses anonymously⁷ in online chat rooms. As a result, people have less opportunity to socialize in person, become increasingly awkward at it, and eventually start avoiding it altogether. In short, they become shy.

7. While being shy has some negative consequences, it has positive aspects, too. For one thing, it has been mentioned that shy people are good listeners ("Shyness").⁸ Furthermore, a university professor writing about his own shyness says, "Because of their tendency toward self-criticism, shy people are often high achievers, and not just in solitary activities like research and writing. Perhaps even more than the drive toward independent achievement, shy people long to make connections to others, often through altruistic⁹ behavior" (Benton).¹⁰

8. To sum up, shyness has both genetic and environmental causes. Some people come into the world shy, while others become shy as a result of their experiences in life. It appears that most people have experienced shyness at some time in their lives, and recent research indicates that the number of shy people is increasing. Therefore, if you are shy, you have lots of company.

Writing Technique Questions

1. Is the topic of this essay primarily the causes or the effects of shyness?
2. Which paragraph(s) discuss(es) the causes?
3. Which paragraph(s) discuss(es) the effects?
4. What two subtopics are named in the thesis statement?
5. Which paragraph(s) discuss(es) the first subtopic?
6. Which paragraph(s) discuss(es) the second subtopic?
7. What is the function of paragraph 3?
8. Which pattern (A, B, C, or D) does the model follow?