

How an extrovert can raise an introvert

March 19, 2015 - 11:41AM

Comments



Kylie Orr

[View more articles from Kylie Orr](#)

[Follow Kylie on Twitter](#)

[Email article](#)

[Print](#)

[Reprints & permissions](#)



Photo: Getty Images

My husband is an introvert and it seems we are raising a diffidence of miniature introverts. As a self-diagnosed extrovert, my ability to understand and accept my children's traits as personality features rather than blights on their social abilities has been treacherous.

My four-year-old daughter is publicly mute. She chooses not to speak to other people, on purpose. She's learned to say "I'm shy" because that's how I've always excused her non-compliance, her ignorance of people's hellos and her inability to even look at an adult. I've been asked if she speaks at all, but at home she is a motor mouth extraordinaire. I find the transition from one to the other exhausting but I know that when I need a break from her constant commentary, I simply need to step out the front door and there will be silence. There may be a leech permanently suctioned to my leg, but it'll be noiseless.

When my third son was at kindergarten, he spoke so quietly the teacher could barely hear him. He enthusiastically played with his peers but was also content in his solo bubble. It turns out what he found difficult was speaking to adults; he barely made eye contact, which at first I found rude and reminded him to use his "manners" until one day he said, "talking to adults is embarrassing". The pressure to perform in an acceptable way in the presence of an adult was overwhelming.

Fast-forward a couple of years and although he's still as quiet as a school playground in the holidays, he's performing well in class and interacting with kids his own age, as well as older children and teachers.

He still loves his bubble though. At a recent family bash with a gaggle of friends and family, he asked midway through the party if he could have a rest on his bed. I wondered what was going on in the head of this young man. I agreed to his request but not before I pursued the line of questioning to assess whether something had happened – an altercation with another child, perhaps? No. There were just too many people, he said.

Meanwhile, my eldest son is a deep thinker, a limelight avoider, and sometimes becomes apprehensive in new situations. Recently he played in a winning grand final sports team and I assumed he'd be elated. Instead, when we arrived home he went straight into his room and closed the door. I followed and proceeded to cross examine the poor chap, wondering why he wasn't shouting with joy and cartwheeling his way through the house, medal hanging around his neck for all to see. He assured me he was fine, nothing was wrong, yes he was happy they won, no he wasn't worried about how he played.

I pressured my husband into checking on him. He returned and said: "He's fine. Here's a book on introverts."

The book is called *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. I was instantly speechless.

If the quiz on [author Susan Cain's website](#) is anything to go by, I'm actually an "ambivert" - that is, someone who has qualities of both extroversion and introversion.

I thrive on social interaction, although I also like my quiet time at home. I'm energised being with other people. However I do have moments of introspection, and it is these times which prompt my friends and family to ask if I'm okay. They're more comfortable with my louder, opinionated side.

Introverts are often misunderstood as shy, and sometimes even rude. I had someone ask me if I'd had my son "tested for autism". A timid child can be difficult to build rapport with but it is important as parents to nurture their sensitive natures.

Susan Cain suggests gradual exposure for a child who is reluctant to try new things or meet new people. "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."

And one of her [recommendations](#) (which would have been great if I read the book *before* I embarked on the label) is to not call your child "shy". They will learn that it is a stigmatised term in our society, which will only compound nervousness. Instead, Cain says, "when others call [your child] shy in front of her (which they will), reframe it lightly. 'Sophie is great at sussing out new situations'."

Finally, Cain says we need to "respect [our children's] desire for time and space to play alone."

So next time my son departs a party early for some alone time, I'll celebrate his self-imposed timeout, commending him for knowing his own limits and acting when he sees things spiralling into a world of noise.

When the big match is all done and dusted and the trophy-winning child retreats to his bed, I'll allow him the space to process the day without a motherly inquisition.

Finally, when my daughter attaches herself to my leg, trying to climb inside my skin when an adult says hello, I won't automatically chastise her for being rude. She'll warm in her own sweet time.

With the right guidance, I'm confident this extrovert - or more accurately, "ambivert" - can raise gorgeous, sensitive, kind introverts.