



THE HIDDEN GIFTS OF QUIET KIDS

Author Marti Olsen Laney tells us what you need to know about your introverted students. **By Hannah Trierweiler**

When I was in first grade, the wonderful Mrs. Gibb gently suggested that my mom make me some playdates. As much as she loved my company on the bench during recess, she thought it might be wise for me to warm up to the other kids. (I'm sure she wanted a few minutes for herself, too—I was a chatterbox!)

And she was right. As an introvert, it's always taken me time and energy to find my place in a group. Usually I prefer private conversations (the kind Mrs. Gibb

offered on the bench) to crowded parties or noisy groups (think a bunch of first graders on a soccer field). As a six-year-old I needed quiet time to regroup during a busy day. And as a (mostly) grown-up, I still need that time today.

That's why I was eager to talk with Marti Olsen Laney, author of *The Hidden Gifts of the Introverted Child*, about how temperament plays out in the classroom, why everyone needs a quiet corner, and what the quietest kids on your class roster may have to offer.

>> How are extroverted and introverted kids different in the classroom?

The main difference is where kids get their energy. The introverted child draws energy from within. She needs to have access to her thoughts, feelings, and perceptions in order to have a sense of vitality and equilibrium. By contrast, the extroverted child is energized by the outside world. She's happiest when she's surrounded by lots of people and plenty of action. School, for instance, is exactly what her system wants. All that activity, stimuli, and chaos makes her feel good. Meanwhile the introverted kid's battery is draining away as the day goes on.

>>What do teachers need to know about temperament?

Children's temperaments—whether they are introverted, extroverted, or somewhere in between—greatly affect how they learn. Temperament affects how kids process information, how they give back information, and how they take tests. It's not just a social issue. And it's important to realize that it's hardwired.

>>How are introverted kids different as learners?

You know the old adage that kids learn best by doing? Well, introverted kids can learn a lot just by watching. Sometimes a teacher might think an introverted child is not involved, not paying attention, when really she's picking up on a lot. Introverted kids can often learn more by watching than by doing. Without getting too technical, they seem to have more of what we call "mirror neurons," cells that help them absorb the meaning of what they see. So just by watching something they can mirror it.

>>How can teachers help introverts participate more?

Introverted kids always need preparation time, and they get very anxious when they don't have it. Lots of times when they can't think of something, it doesn't mean they don't know it. So it's really good to give them notice: "In a few minutes, we're going to talk about this," >>

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or “Carlos, give this some thought, and a little later you can tell us what you think about it.”

>>You’ve said that the way we use memory is tied to temperament.

Yes. In general, introverted kids take in more information, so they have more to process. But they also need to sleep on

it, or go through the overnight cycle, so that it’s stored in long-term memory. They use long-term memory more. And they need to practice how to retrieve things from their memory. That’s why it’s good to use hooks, to help them tap their long-term memory. The number one thing for extroverts to understand is that an introverted child may know some-

thing, but the words may not be there on the tip of the tongue.

>>How can we make classrooms more introvert-friendly?

The noise and the constant action of the classroom can be difficult for introverted kids. It drains their energy, as can the constant transition from circle time to math groups to recess to reading. All of those changes can be very hard for introverted kids. It takes energy to adjust to each new activity and its different pace and requirements. Keeping a reliable routine and smoothing transitions can really help.

>>Just the typical activity level of 30 kids can seem overwhelming.

Yes. Introverted kids need quiet time and time to be alone. Adult introverts remember finding refuge in the school library. And now, for safety purposes, school libraries are sometimes closed at lunch. That’s really tough for introverted kids. It’s also important to have projects that kids can work on by themselves. Not everything needs to be in a group.

>>What advice can teachers give to “innies” to help them cope?

It’s good to help them practice speaking up in clear and simple sentences. They have to practice, so that if they do have something that they want to be heard, they can lean forward, look people in the eye, and say it in a firm way. And if no one is listening, introverted kids need to learn to say, “Excuse me, I wasn’t finished.” You know, blow their own horn a little bit. It’ll be difficult, but they can practice doing that and get better at it.

>>What about teachers’ temperaments? Is it hard for extroverts to “get” their introverted students?

Studies show that there are more extroverted than introverted teachers, especially in elementary school. Of course, you’d have to be! And as extroverts, often teachers’ whole systems are built on quick, quick, quick. So it’s good to think about how that pace may not work for some kids. And just realize what a difficult environment the classroom is

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and how much effort introverted kids are putting in on top of what they're learning. That goes a long way.

>>Does it help to acknowledge temperament differences with kids?

It's so important to talk with kids about their unique qualities and differences. Have a conversation with kids where you ask, "Is it easy for you to go to a friend's party?" And share your own experiences. It means so much for a teacher to admit, "you know, sometimes I feel kind of shy as well." It can do a lot to normalize everyone's behavior and to prevent temperament differences from being made into something good or bad.

>>You make a distinction between introversion and shyness. How are they different?

Both introverts and extroverts can be shy. Shyness is really more of a social fear, while most introverted kids actually have good social skills. But the way they socialize is through one-on-one conversation, so it's a different set of skills than the one extroverts use at parties or in other situations with lots of people.

Surprisingly, more shy people are extroverted than introverted. That's sometimes a problem, because extroverts need that stimulation and interaction with people. They want it and yet they're afraid to go out and seek it, so

they can actually end up quite depressed. I've worked with some shy extroverts, and it's really painful for them. Like needing chocolate cake but you can't eat it.

>>Where do introverted kids shine?

Introverted kids have a lot of fabulous information inside of them, which comes to the surface if you talk to them one-on-

one or have them write in a journal. It's just amazing, all of the stuff they know about, or could tell you about what's happening in class.

In fact, they're often smarter than you think, because they don't test as well as extroverts. They're like icebergs. And we need them. They'll be the ones finding the next cure for cancer. □

How to Spot an "Innie"

About 75 percent of us are extroverts, while 25 percent are "innies." Innies are more likely to...

■ **SPEAK SOFTLY** and occasionally pause to hunt for words.

■ **ACT QUIET** in many situations, but may be chatty in comfortable surroundings.

■ **FEEL TIRED** after social outings and need time to recharge in quiet.

■ **STAND AWAY** from the action and observe instead of getting hands-on.

■ **LOOK DISINTERESTED**, glazed over, or overwhelmed at times.

■ **HAVE A FEW CLOSE FRIENDS** and regard others as acquaintances.

FROM *THE HIDDEN GIFTS OF THE INTROVERTED CHILD*,
BY MARTI OLSEN LANEY (WORKMAN, 2005)

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