

Work on shy kids' social skills, not just their poor vocabulary

Experts say skills like making eye contact can buffer against disadvantages in language

Priscilla Goy

Parents of shy children should focus on developing their kids' social communication skills, instead of just their vocabulary, to help them make more friends.

That is the suggestion of two researchers who found that, with "high-functioning social communication skills", the poor vocabulary of a shy child would have no significant effect on how well liked he is by his peers.

Such skills include being able to recognise when other people are upset, keeping quiet when others are talking, and making eye contact.

The local study of 164 pre-schoolers, aged four to six years and of varied levels of shyness, was done by Assistant Professor of Social Sciences (Psychology) Cheung Hoi Shan from Yale-NUS College, which released a statement about the study yesterday.

She wrote a paper about the study with Associate Professor John Elliott from the National University of

Singapore (NUS), and it was published in June in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*.

"We found that the presence of a good vocabulary in a shy child offered no additional buffering effect for peer likeability if he did not possess high-functioning social communication skills," said Dr Cheung.

"Conversely, shy children with poor vocabulary skills were assumed to be less likeable, but high-functioning social communication skills serve as an effective buffer against the presumed language disadvantage."

Pre-school experts told *The Straits Times* they agreed with the study findings.

Ms Juliet Tanuwira, associate psychologist at pre-school Kindle Garden, said: "We have a shy child with limited vocabulary, but he knows how to listen and pay attention when his friends are talking, and they interact with him though he may not be talking that much."

"Children can naturally pick up social skills during everyday routines, such as when adults make eye contact with them. But explicitly teaching such skills would help if the children don't have such skills."

Dr Rebecca Chan, a pre-school consultant, said pre-schools could

help children gain more social skills through role play and puppetry. "When they get engrossed in play activities, they are less shy. Giving them lots of encouragement or partnering them with friends who are more outspoken could also help."

Ms Nirmala Murugaian, chief executive of childcare centre Child at Street 11, said developing a child's social skills is important as it also "removes fear, which stunts a child's ability to learn".

IT entrepreneur Diana Sabrain, 29, had sent her older son, now eight, to Child at Street 11 previously. She said: "He had a good vocabulary, but was shy and had poor social skills and didn't interact well with his friends. But the pre-school teachers encouraged him a lot, teaching him to speak at appropriate times, and he has more friends now."

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IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

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DR REBECCA CHAN, on children gaining social skills through role play and puppetry.