

Stage Fright

When Leo's preschool had their Spring Concert last week, our son performed on stage for the first time. Leo is not a shy child, but we were not sure how he would handle this entirely new situation. It turned out to be very difficult for him, and he was clearly miserable the entire time.

So were his parents.

I wanted so badly to rush to the front and pull Leo off the stage, but I realized that would call even more attention to his misery—and he would fear it even more the next time.

And so John and I sat and prayed for the end to come—which it did, at long last. Minutes later he was confidently escorting us downstairs to show us his classroom. It was merely being on stage, and with all those people watching him, that made him anxious.

Seeing Leo's unhappiness during his performance was especially painful for me because I was terribly shy as a child. At age 4, I might have sung songs in front of my brothers and sisters, but more likely I would have entertained my doll and stuffed cow. I didn't speak to adults besides my parents and grandmother. During my first two-and-a-half years of school I didn't talk to any of the teachers. I still remember my first grade teacher losing her temper and yelling at me for not answering a question. She later apologized, but the incident didn't make me any more inclined to speak to her—and I never did.

For me, it was a blend of shyness and stubbornness. It took me years before I would volunteer in class. I always resented that "class participation" meant raising your hand and saying something even if you had nothing to contribute. Can't a student participate without taking the floor?

Over time I have become much less shy, though I am still very stubborn. But that happened naturally as I gained confidence along the way, not because I was forced to appear on stage.

Watching Leo last week made me wonder why we insist that every child has to be a performer. Why do children need to be able to sing in public? Will our sons be better people if they are able to sing or speak on stage? Don't they have at least a decade to develop a comfort with public speaking? Am I doing my son a disservice by forcing him to perform? Or am I doing him a greater disservice by letting him wait to perform when he is ready?