

# How to Overcome Shyness

*By Andrea Hazard*

**Shyness can be a lonesome feeling. But the good news is, you're not alone.**

What do award-winning actor Julia Roberts, legendary sports hero Michael Jordan, and funny guy Jim Carrey have in common? Would you ever guess they all describe themselves as shy? Add Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, and Mia Hamm to the endless list of shy stars and everyday people like you or your best friend.

"When I'm around people I don't really know, I just don't want to talk," says Jacob Smith, 14. "I try to blend in with my surroundings so no one sees me. I don't want to be noticed; it's weird."

In fact, more than 40 percent of teenagers and adults in the United States consider themselves shy, according to the Palo Alto Medical Foundation. Shyness is feeling a little uneasy or as if you want to hide when you're around other people or in a new situation. Shyness is very common in children, teens, and adults.

In fact, most people experience situations in which they feel shy. Think about yourself: Maybe you are afraid to talk in class but look forward to pitching for your baseball team. Maybe you love to tell jokes to your friends but feel awkward when you have to talk in front of the whole class.

## The Roots of Shyness

What makes people shy? Several factors, including genetics, psychology, life experiences, and environment, can influence whether a person is shy.

For example, in some families, everybody seems to be shy, but research shows that an encouraging environment can help such people be more outgoing, explains Renee Gilbert, a psychologist and shyness expert. People who are not naturally shy might have had bad experiences that triggered shyness.

Jacob remembers becoming painfully shy after moving from Oregon to Rochester, Minn., in second grade. He marks the first day in his new school as one of his earliest memories of the powerful anxiety that left him frozen in his footsteps at his classroom door.

"I looked inside and saw a whole bunch of people; I didn't recognize any of them," Jacob recalls. "My mom had to pretty much push me into the room."

He is glad his mom encouraged him because he ended up making two friends that day, including the person who today is his best friend. Jacob still often struggles to open up to new people and new situations, though.

Being shy is OK as long as shyness doesn't cause you to avoid or miss opportunities you would enjoy, Gilbert explains.

"When we are feeling shy, we don't necessarily know how to fit in, and we're afraid to try things," she says. "So we sit back, gather up the strength to do something and then the opportunity might have already passed. After time, we miss opportunity after opportunity. Why would we want to shortchange ourselves?"

## **Don't Miss Out**

Learning to do the things you love doing is the answer for many shy kids.

For example, Hannah Zadeii, 12, of Dellwood, Minn., loves figure skating and enjoys the challenge of competition. But she's naturally shy.

"The first time I competed, I was really scared," she recalls. "Looking at all the audience watching me made me really nervous."

Hannah didn't let the butterflies in her stomach ruin her first figure skating competition. Instead, she ignored them and focused on her skating. The result? She skated well. The music helped her move beyond her shyness, Hannah explains. "If the music is happy, you have to be happy, so people won't know you're shy."

As she has continued in her sport, Hannah has become more outgoing overall. "I'm overcoming my shyness by skating," Hannah says. "Skating lets out your emotions."

Jacob is also learning to overcome his shyness bit by bit. "I don't have that many friends, and I'd like to make more," he says. Recently, Jacob asked his parents for advice, and they encouraged him to try new things and to put himself in situations where he would need to participate, such as signing up for the Boy Scouts and enrolling in acting classes at a youth theater in his hometown.

"My shyness is getting better, but it's not gone," Jacob says. "I'm beginning to deal with it a little better." He is dealing with it so well that he acted in his first play last fall.

## Take Small Steps

Overcoming shyness takes time and effort, Gilbert says. Taking small steps is the key to becoming more and more comfortable in new social situations. She says it worked for her.

"When I started off trying to get over being shy, I decided to do little steps at a time," Gilbert says, recalling the small steps she took years ago, including practicing smiling and saying hi to people. Once she became comfortable with that, she took a step toward her next goal: striking up conversations with clerks in grocery stores.

"I set new goals as New Year's resolutions each year and raised the bar every year," Gilbert says. "Shyness is not the sort of thing that most people get over overnight. Take baby steps, and if you're not succeeding, just make your steps smaller, and try again."

## Tips for Overcoming Shyness

**Psychologist Renee Gilbert offers these tips for feeling comfortable in social situations:**

- **Think of stuff to talk about before you leave home.**  
Prepare things to talk about before you're in a social situation. If you know your classmates are interested in an upcoming event, learn about it so you can join in on the conversations.
- **Let people know you're shy.**  
If you're shy, chances are you show it. Instead of letting people draw their own—possibly negative—conclusions, tell the truth. Explain that you are shy and feel nervous but enjoy talking to people.
- **Reward your efforts.**  
Sometimes your efforts to overcome your shyness will seem to fail: Maybe you smiled at a classmate who didn't smile back. Don't sweat it. Be proud that you tried, and then try again.
- **Make things easy for the other person.**  
Remember, you're not the only shy person around. Do what you think might help others feel good—for example, say hello, smile, or make eye contact.
- **Pick one social skill to practice at a time.**  
Start simply. For example, smile or be the first person to say hi.

Choose skills you feel comfortable enough with to practice for a day, a week, a month, or even a year.

- **Just do it.**

Shyness has a way of building on itself. If you don't do one thing, you can miss out on doing another thing. Instead, try one or two new activities. You might surprise yourself.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. According to the Palo Alto Medical Foundation what percentage of teenagers and adults in the U.S. consider themselves shy?

- A more than 40 percent
- B 14 percent
- C less than 40 percent
- D 40 percent

2. The writer of this passage provides a list of tips to overcome shyness. Which of the following is NOT a tip on the list?

- A choose one social skill to practice at a time
- B do not try anything new
- C prepare things to talk about in social situations
- D smile and make eye contact with the other person

3. Based on the passage, it is likely that someone who is shy

- A will be willing to try many new things
- B will be comfortable meeting new people in a large group
- C will strike up conversations with strangers in a grocery store
- D will feel nervous speaking in front of a large group

4. Read the following sentence: "Add Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, and Mia Hamm to the endless list of shy stars and everyday people like you or your best friend."

In this sentence the word **endless** means

- A long
- B short
- C important
- D famous

5. This passage is mostly about

- A how to make new friends
- B celebrities who are shy
- C how to overcome shyness
- D how to feel shy in a new school

6. According to the passage, what is shyness?

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7. Based on the passage, how did Renee Gilbert most likely come up with tips for overcoming shyness?

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8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Overcoming shyness can take time and effort, \_\_\_\_\_ taking small steps can help someone feel more comfortable in new social situations.

- A but
- B because
- C before
- D instead

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

Who? Jacob

(did) What? \_\_\_\_\_

When? \_\_\_\_\_

Where? \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

10. Read the vocabulary word and definition below and complete questions 10a, 10b, and 11.

**Vocabulary Word:** encouraged (en · cour · aged): to give someone support which allows them to feel confident that they can accomplish something.

10a. Read the sentences below and underline the word **encouraged**.

1. Many people have overcome shyness because their family and friends have encouraged them and given them confidence.
2. Someone must have encouraged Julia Roberts and given her the confidence to act in movies.
3. When reaching her goal became challenging, Samantha’s friends encouraged her by making signs and cheering her on at the race.
4. My art teacher encouraged me to draw more after she saw some of my paintings.
5. The coach encouraged the team by telling each person that he was proud of their hard work.

10b. Which picture most likely represents a person who provides encouragement during a football game?



11. Is receiving a good grade on a test encouraging? Please explain your answer.

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## Teacher Guide &amp; Answers

**Passage Reading Level:** Lexile 860

**Featured Text Structure:** Enumerative – the writer includes a list, giving examples of something. This text structure is often combined with cause/effect or problem/solution

**Passage Summary:** In this passage, the writer provides information about shyness, including reasons for shyness, people's experiences with shyness, and advice for overcoming shyness. This passage provides a list for readers with tips for overcoming shyness.

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- D how to feel shy in a new school

6. According to the passage, what is shyness?

**Suggested answer:** In the passage, the writer defines shyness as feeling uneasy. People who are shy may want to hide when they are around other people or in new situations. It is common in many children, teens, and adults. [paragraph #3]

7. Based on the passage, how did Renee Gilbert most likely come up with tips for overcoming shyness?

**Suggested answer:** Gilbert is an expert on shyness because of her work as a psychologist. If she is an expert, this means that she has studied a lot about shyness and may have worked with people who are shy. [paragraph #6] She also is shy herself, and has used these tips to help herself overcome shyness. [paragraphs #19 & #20]

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Overcoming shyness can take time and effort, \_\_\_\_\_ taking small steps can help someone feel more comfortable in new social situations.

- A but
- B because
- C before
- D instead

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

Jacob felt anxious on the first day in his new school because he was painfully shy.

Who? Jacob

(did) What? **felt anxious**

When? **on the first day**

Where? **in his new school**

Why? **because he was painfully shy**

10. ReadWorks recommends that you teach this vocabulary word to the whole class out loud using the four steps listed below.

**Vocabulary Word:** encouraged

**Step 1:** Introduce the word

- a. Teacher writes the word on the board and divides it into syllables: (en · cour · aged)
- b. Teacher says: "This word is encouraged. What is the word?" [All students reply together out loud: "encouraged."]

**Step 2:** Provide a child-friendly definition

- a. Teacher says: "Encourage means to give someone support which allows them to feel confident that they can accomplish something. You can encourage someone to continue doing something or to try something new."
- b. Teacher says: "In the passage, many of the children who are shy have parents who encouraged them to try new things, which would help them deal with their shyness. For example, Jacob's parents encouraged him to sign up for new things like acting class, which gave him the confidence to be in a play even though he is shy."
- c. Teacher says: "What is the word?" [All students reply together out loud: "encouraged."]

**Step 3:** Practice the word

Teacher provides examples and additional opportunities to repeat the word. Read the 1<sup>st</sup> sentence out loud to your students. Begin reading it again and when you come to the vocabulary word prompt students to say the vocabulary word out loud. Then, finish reading the sentence out loud to your students.

- 10a.**
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  2. Someone must have encouraged Julia Roberts and given her the confidence to act in movies.
  3. When reaching her goal became challenging, Samantha's friends encouraged her by making signs and cheering her on at the race.
  4. My art teacher encouraged me to draw more after she saw some of my paintings.
  5. The coach encouraged the team by telling each person that he was proud of their hard work.

**Step 4:** Check for student understanding

This step can be completed as a whole class activity or as an independent practice.

- 10b.** Which picture most likely represents a person who provides encouragement during a football game?



- 11.** Is receiving a good grade on a test encouraging? Please explain your answer.

**Suggested answer:** It would encourage someone to try harder in school if they get a good grade on a test, because it would give them confidence that they could be successful. If they feel confused in class, a student would not feel encouraged to try very hard, because they do not have confidence that they can do well.

*Suggested Additional Vocabulary:* endless, uneasy, situations, environment, expert, triggered, opportunity, competition, focused, participate, resolutions, conclusions, efforts, overcome