

WHAT'S HIDING BEHIND SHAME?



BEING A TRAUMA INFORMED COMMUNITY



Shame is a complex and unpleasant emotion that creates feelings of inadequacy. It is a very common emotion for children who have experienced developmental trauma and it takes over their capacity to experience self-worth and self-love. So how can we change how a child sees themselves? How can we show them they are worthy?

Feeling shame is similar to believing 'I am bad', 'I am not worthy', 'I am not lovable'. Shame though is different to guilt, because if you feel guilty you acknowledge your behaviour was bad, but not that you are inherently bad.

How does shame take over?

Shame hides its roots in early relationships, and for children who have experienced developmental trauma, those relationships are usually with their primary carers. Negative parental responses often set children up to have a learned and ingrained shame response. This could be from:

- > being ignored
- > a lack of affection or love withdrawal
- > name-calling and degrading
- > disapproval or disgust
- > anger
- > not teaching the difference between doing wrong and being wrong.

These can all contribute to a child's core belief they are not worthy of being loved and there is something 'wrong' or 'bad' about them. Children who experience shame usually also have very low self-worth. They fear being disconnected from others and do not believe they are someone worthy of connection, or even love.

How does shame hide?

Children who might be experiencing shame find it difficult to accept responsibility for their behaviour. They also:

- > struggle with any sort of feedback
- > avoid situations where they might lose a game or not be able to perform
- > find it hard to make decisions for themselves in case they get it wrong
- > may lie or blame others to avoid feeling shame.

Children who experience shame usually do not understand that making a mistake will **not** jeopardise the relationship with their carer. This may be because in the past, making mistakes has put the child in danger or cost them their relationship with their carer.

So... what can we do about it?

The best antidote to shame is **empathy** and **connection**. Children need to experience ongoing physical and emotional safety to allow themselves to build a bond with their carers. Carers can connect and be attuned to a child's needs by providing them unconditional care, patience, understanding, respect and love.

Addressing shame is a **long-term process** reliant on **relational healing** – there is no quick fix as shame is ingrained in a child's belief system. Challenging their beliefs with an alternate perspective **repeatedly** over time is needed. Here are some ways to help do that:

- ✓ When a child makes a mistake, focus on collaborative problem-solving. Where possible, make light of the mistake and talk about how easily it can be resolved.
- ✓ When a child misbehaves, be mindful of your words. Focus attention on the 'act' rather than the child. For example, 'The milk has been dropped, oh dear!', rather than 'You dropped the milk, again!'
- ✓ Repetitive, consistent responses to the child, allow them to expect your future responses and may minimise their shame. It may also reduce any lying or blaming of others.
- ✓ Make time to spend together, sharing an activity the child enjoys.
- ✓ Listen to the child with empathy and acceptance. Acceptance does not equate to agreement, but you can accept this is how the child may feel.
- ✓ Create a special ritual (like a handshake) or nicknames for each other to reinforce your unique connection to the child.
- ✓ Have a special day of the week where you share the child's favourite foods.



Note: The terms 'child' and 'children' also refer to 'young person' and 'young people'.

Here to help! Come and talk to us if you'd like more practical ways you can be trauma informed.

Sources:

- > McKenzie, D. (2015). Shame. *Prosody Blog*, May. Australian Childhood Foundation. Retrieved from professionals.childhood.org.au/prosody/2015/05/shame
- > Source images: Freepik.com (pch.vector, Freepik)



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