

# GUILT

*A feeling of regret directed externally, such as towards having committed an act that would be considered bad or harmful to others.*

Focus of evaluation: Specific behaviour

Degree of Distress: Less painful

Feelings: Tension, Remorse, Regret

Impact on Self: Minimal

Primary concern: Effects on others

Motivation: Wants to confess, repair

Degree of anger: Moderate anger

Behaviours: Triggers problem solving, relationship repairs

## *The function of guilt:*

Guilt is described as a 'mature' emotion, as it develops later in childhood than feelings of sadness or happiness. It provides the framework upon which a child's conscience can develop. A child that is able to experience guilt for their actions is one that can experience empathy; They have the ability to regret making another person feel sad or angry and understand that they should correct this.

Guilt can be a positive motivator- Feelings of guilt may motivate one's self to repair the situation to reduce the distress caused to those around them e.g. by confessing and apologizing. Through apologizing and correcting the situation, they can develop their self-esteem; they can feel more confident and secure knowing that they can successfully correct their wrongdoings.

# THE CYCLE OF SHAME

Early experiences (Neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse)

Internalised understanding- "It happened because I am a bad person"

Feelings of shame develop- "I am unlovable/worthless"



Difficult behaviour e.g. stealing, sexualized behaviour, aggression



**"Connection"**: empathy, curiosity and acceptance e.g. "I wonder why..." "It must be really difficult for you..."



Caregiver helps child to understand their own feelings and behaviours.



Expression of unconditional love- child offered belief that they are lovable and worthy of nurture and empathy.



**Correction** of behaviour suggested (e.g. handmade card to apologise)

**Cycle of Shame =  
BROKEN**



Repeated questions e.g. "You did hit your brother didn't you?"



Escalation of situation- parent also becomes dysregulated



Shield of Shame activated: Child lies, rages, minimizes or blames



Feelings of shame are intensified: "My carer hates me- I am unlovable"

Behaviour is repeated

**Cycle of Shame =  
REINFORCED**

# SHAME AND GUILT:

## A brief guide

A brief introduction to shame and guilt and advice on how you may provide support to a child who experiences these feelings.



*For more information about shame and advice on how you can support a child, please see the online advice booklet created by NHS Cumbria:  
<http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/eLibrary/Content/Internet/327/888/3988912155.pdf>*

# SHAME

*An intense feeling of humiliation and distress, which is directed internally (at the self), due to a perceived sense of inadequacy or 'badness' e.g. "I am a bad person" "I am unlovable" "I hate myself"*

Focus of evaluation: Global self

Degree of Distress: More painful

Feelings: Small, Worthless, Powerless

Impact on Self: Global devaluation

Primary Concern: Other's evaluation of Self

Motivation: Wants to hide, strike back

Degree of Anger; Intense Anger

Behaviours: Blames others to avoid devaluation of self, lies, gets angry, minimizes

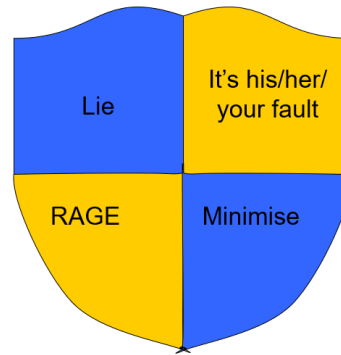
## *The function of shame*

For a young child that experiences a sensitive caregiver, feelings of shame are experienced at a young age. These may be triggered by being told off and help a young child to learn not to repeat unacceptable behaviours. As the child matures, the caregiver supports their understanding and these feelings can evolve into guilt.

## *Why may a looked after child experience shame?*

Sadly, a looked after child may not have experienced a sensitive caregiver that supported their cognitive, social and emotional development. They may be stuck in a pervasive state of shame. Their early experiences of neglect, abuse and perceived rejection may have led them to develop an inherently negative view of themselves as unlovable and bad.

## The Shield of Shame



Intense feelings of shame can be incredibly painful for a child to experience. To try and avoid these hurtful feelings, a child may employ specific behavioural strategies:

**Lying:** Lying can be employed as a way of denying any wrongful behaviours, which are perceived to be reflections of their own 'badness'. They may feel unworthy of love and attention and as such, may also use lying as a way of creating conflict and maintaining distance from their caregiver.

**Blaming:** A child may blame other people to try and deflect attention away from themselves. They may feel heightened levels of anxiety when they feel that others may be evaluating them, in fear that their 'true' 'bad' self will be exposed.

**Raging:** Heightened displays of anger or aggression may be employed. For some children, experiencing anger may be much less painful than the emotion behind it- shame.

**Minimising:** A child may minimize their role in the wrongful act or the extent to which their actions affected another person. Apologising to another person may trigger these deep feelings of shame, which they may seek to minimize.

## How should I parent a child that experiences shame?

A child that experiences intense feelings of shame will need to experience a caregiver that supports their feelings of safety and nurtures their ability to distinguish between them self and their actions. This will help their feelings of shame evolve into feelings of guilt.

Please note: 'Traditional' behavioural techniques and punishments will not work, and could feed into their ongoing cycle of shame.

- Repeatedly asking them whether they took money/hit someone e.t.c may only make them employ their defensive strategies, such as lying.
- Becoming angry and dysregulated yourself may also trigger these defensive strategies- try to remain calm and avoid escalation.
- Telling them off for being 'bad' may only reinforce their own belief that they are a bad person, thus reinforcing their shame.

## **"Connection before correction"**

Respond to any difficult behaviours with curiosity, acceptance and empathy e.g. "I heard from school today that you hit someone in your class... I wonder whether you were feeling a bit angry? It must be really hard to feel so angry at school... Perhaps we could make a card for them to say sorry?"

Provide **meaningful consequences**, rather than meaningless punishment e.g. baking a cake to say sorry to a sibling.

**Express your unconditional love:** Reassure them that you love them unconditionally. You only seek to change their difficult behaviours.