

**"Good" Children - at What Price?**  
**The Secret Cost of Shame**  
**by Robin Grille and Beth Macgregor**

A five-month-old baby is lying in his mother's arms. He is close to sleep, then wakes and begins to cry. His mother tells him that he should stop being a naughty boy, and that she will be cross with him if he doesn't sleep.

An 18-month-old child is taken to a restaurant with her father and uncle. Her father goes to the bar, leaving the child with the uncle at the table. The child gets down from the table to follow her father. She is grabbed by her uncle and told that she is a bad child, and to stay in her chair. She looks around worriedly for her father.

At an adult's birthday party, a six-year-old is awake long past his bedtime. He is running around the hall with the helium-filled balloons. His father yells at him to leave the balloons alone, and tells him to stop being a trouble-maker.

What did these children learn from these experiences? Many would say that the adults' responses were necessary to teach the child the difference between right and wrong: between "good" and "bad" behavior. Verbal punishment is common in almost every home and school. It relies on shame as the deterrent, in the same way that corporal punishment relies on pain. Shaming is one of the most common methods used to regulate children's behavior. But what if shaming our children is harming our children? Could it be that repeated verbal punishment leaves children with an enduring sense of themselves as inherently "bad"? If so, what can we do differently?

**What is Shame?**

Shame is designed to cause children to curtail behavior through negative thoughts and feelings about themselves. It involves a comment - direct or indirect - about what the child is. Shaming operates by giving children a negative image about their selves - rather than about the impact of their behavior.

**What Does Shaming Look and Sound Like?**

Shaming makes the child wrong for feeling, wanting or needing something. It can take many forms; here are some everyday examples: The put-down: "You naughty boy!", "You're acting like a spoiled child!", "You selfish brat!", "You cry-baby!". Moralizing: "Good little boys don't act that way", "You've been a bad little girl". The age-based expectation: "Grow up!", "Stop acting like a baby!", "Big boys don't cry", The gender-based expectation: "Toughen-up!", "Don't be a sissy!", The competency-based expectation: "You're hopeless!". The comparison: "Why can't you be more like so-and-so?", "None of the other children are acting like you are".

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## **How Common is Shaming?**

Shaming is very common, and is considered by many to be acceptable. Shaming is not restricted to "abusive" families; in fact, it occurs in the "nicest" of family and school environments. A recent study of Canadian schoolchildren, for instance, found that only 4% had not been the targets of their parents' shaming; including "rejecting, demeaning, terrorizing, criticizing (destructively), or insulting statements" (Solomon & Serres, 1999).

As parents we tend to resort to shaming when we feel overwhelmed, irritated or frustrated, and we feel the need to control our children. Until very recently little consideration has been given to its harmful effects.

## **Shame: A New Frontier of Psychological Study**

The use of corporal punishment against children has been hotly debated, and under increasing negative scrutiny in recent years. More and more nations legislate against it, schools ban it, international organizations devoted to its elimination are proliferating, and research psychologists have amassed mountains of evidence of its long-term damaging effects. In the meantime, the issue of "shaming" as punishment has been largely overlooked. Only recently have psychologists begun to discover that shaming has serious repercussions.

Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, says that we are now discovering the role that shame plays in relationship difficulties and violent behavior. There is a new effort by psychologists to study shame, how it is acquired, and how it affects a person's relationships and functioning in society. The study of this previously "ignored emotion" is such a new frontier because it is the most difficult emotion to detect in others. Dr Paul Eckman, from the University of California, says that shame is the most private of emotions, and that humans have yet to evolve a facial expression that clearly communicates it. Is this why we might not see when our children are suffering from this secret emotion?

## **How Shame is Acquired**

No-one is born ashamed. It is a learned, self-conscious emotion, which starts at roughly two years of age with the advent of language and self-image. Although humans are born with a capacity for shame, the propensity to become ashamed in specific situations is learned.

***Children have a natural desire to develop a social conscience. When treated with the same respect as adults, and exposed to adults who respect each other; children will naturally develop a capacity for empathic, caring and respectful behavior.***

This means that wherever there is shame, there has been a shamer. We learn to be ashamed of ourselves because someone of significance in our lives put us to shame. Shaming messages are more powerful when they come from those we are closest to, from people we love, admire or look up to. That is why parents' use of shaming can have the deepest effects on children. However, shaming messages from teachers, older siblings and peers can also injure a child's self-image. Since children are more vulnerable and impressionable than adults, shaming messages received in childhood are significantly more difficult to erase.

Messages of shame are mostly verbal, but there can be great shaming power in a look of disdain, contempt, or disgust.

### **Why Is Shaming So Common?**

Shaming acts as a pressure valve to relieve parental frustration. Shaming is an anger-release for the parent; it makes the shamer feel better - if only momentarily.

When made to feel unworthy, children often work extra hard to please their parents. This makes the parent think that the shaming has "worked". But has it?

### **The Damaging Effects of Shame**

To understand the damage wrought by shame, we need to look deeper than the goal of "good" behavior. If we think that verbal punishment has "worked" because it changed what the child is doing, then we have dangerously limited our view of the child to the behaviors that we can see. It is all too easy to overlook the inner world of children: the emotions that underlie their behavior, and the suffering caused by shame. It is also easy to miss what the child does once out of range of the shamer.

Even well-meaning adults can sometimes underestimate children's sensitivity to shaming language. There is mounting evidence that some of the words used to scold children - household words previously thought "harmless" - have the power to puncture children's self-esteem for years to come. A child's self-identity is shaped around the things they hear about themselves. A ten-year-old girl, for example, was overcome with anxiety after spilling a drink. She exclaimed over and over: "I'm so stupid! I'm so stupid!". These were the exact words her mother had used against her. She lived in fear of her parents' judgement, and learned to shame herself in the same way that she had been shamed.

If children's emotional needs are dismissed, if their experiences are trivialized, they grow up feeling unimportant. If they are told that they are "bad" and "naughty", they absorb this message and take this belief into adulthood.

Shame makes people feel diminished. It is a fear of being exposed,

and leads to withdrawal from relationships. Shaming creates a feeling of powerlessness to act, and to express oneself: we want to dance, but we're stopped by memories of being told not to be "so childish". We seek pleasure, but we're inhibited by inner voices telling us we are "self-indulgent" or "lazy". We strive to excel, or to speak out, but we're held back by a suspicion that we are not good enough. Shame takes the shape of the inner voices and images that mimic those who told us "Don't be stupid," or "Don't be silly!"

Shame restrains a child's self-expression: having felt the sting of an adult's negative judgement, the shamed child censors herself in order to escape being branded as "naughty" or "bad". Shame crushes children's natural exuberance, their curiosity, and their desire to do things by themselves.

Thomas Scheff, a University of California sociologist, has said that shame inhibits the expression of all emotions - with the occasional exception of anger. People who feel shamed tend toward two polarities of expression: emotional muteness and paralysis, or bouts of hostility and rage. Some swing from one to the other.

Like crying for sadness, and shouting for anger, most emotions have a physical expression which allows them to dissipate. Shame doesn't. This is why the effects of shame last well into the long term.

Recent research tells us that shame motivates people to withdraw from relationships, and to become isolated. Moreover, the shamed tend to feel humiliated and disapproved of by others, which can lead to hostility, even fury. Numerous studies link shame with a desire to punish others. When angry, shamed individuals are more likely to be malevolent, indirectly aggressive or self-destructive. Psychiatrist Peter Loader states that people cover up or compensate for deep feelings of shame with attitudes of contempt, superiority, domineering or bullying, self-deprecation, or obsessive perfectionism.

### **Severe Shame and Mental Illness**

When shaming has been severe or extreme, it can contribute to the development of mental illness. This link has been underestimated until now. Researchers are increasingly finding connections between early childhood shaming and conditions such as depression, anxiety, personality disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorders. In his book, *The Psychology of Shame*, Gershen Kaufman goes further to assert a link between shaming and addictive disorders, eating disorders, phobias and sexual dysfunction.

### **Shame Doesn't Teach about Relationship or Empathy**

While shaming has the power to control behavior, it does not have the power to teach empathy. When we repeatedly label a child "naughty" or otherwise, we condition them to focus inwardly, and they become pre-occupied with themselves and their failure to please. Thus

children learn to label themselves, but learn nothing about relating, or about considering and comprehending the feelings of others. For empathy to develop, children need to be shown how others feel. In calling children "naughty", for example, we have told the child nothing about how we feel in response to their behavior. Children cannot learn about caring for others' feelings, nor about how their behavior impacts on others, while they are thinking: "There is something wrong with me." In fact, psychotherapists and researchers are finding that individuals who are more prone to shame, are less capable of empathy toward others, and more self-preoccupied.

The only true basis for morality is a deeply felt empathy toward the feelings of others. Empathy is not necessarily what drives the "well-behaved" "good boy" or "good girl".

### **The Myth of Morality**

We are naive to confuse shame-based compliance with morally motivated behavior. At best, repeated shaming leads to a shallow conformism, based on escaping disapproval and seeking rewards. The child learns to avoid punishment by becoming submissive and compliant. The charade of "good manners" is not necessarily grounded in true interpersonal respect.

### **What Should We Consider Shameful?**

Shame varies among cultures and families: what is considered shameful in one place may be permissible, unremarkable, even desirable in another. What is called "naughty behavior" is usually arbitrary and subjective: it varies significantly from family to family. In one family, nudity is acceptable, in another unthinkable. Being noisy and boisterous is welcome in one family, frowned upon in another. While one family might enjoy speaking all at once around the dinner table, another family might find this rude. Such examples help us to realize that our way is not the only way: that our own way of deciding what is shameful behavior can be arbitrary and variable.

### **The History of Shaming**

Children have been shamed for many hundreds of years. Historically, they have been thought to be inherently antisocial, and their behavior was seen through this lens. One seventeenth century author, Richard Allestree, wrote: "The newborn babe is full of the stains and pollution of sin, which it inherits from our first parents through our loins"<sup>1</sup>. In the Middle Ages, the ritual of Baptism actually included the exorcism of the devil from the child. Children who were felt to be too demanding were thought to be possessed by demons. Some early church fathers declared that if a baby cried more than a little, she was committing a sin. It has been an age-old pattern to blame the child for the numerous challenges and difficulties encountered by parents.

This way of thinking about children has persisted into modern times,

although in less extreme ways. For example, a child having a tantrum is often seen as "spoiled", and deliberately trying to antagonize his parents. A crying child risks being described as a "little terror" or "whiner" who is "just trying to get attention".

There is no question that parenting can be frustrating sometimes. But it is groundless to automatically assume that the child is out to upset us, or to attribute some kind of nasty intention to the child. This imagined malevolence is usually what underlies the impulse to shame children.

### **A Shift in Attitude: Respecting the Child**

It is entirely possible to set strong boundaries with children without shaming. However, this requires a fundamental attitude shift, beginning with re-evaluating what we think is motivating our child's behavior.

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### **"Misbehavior"? Or Developmental Stage?**

Sometimes what we condemn as "misbehavior" is simply the child's attempt to have some need met in the best way they know, or to master a new skill. The more parents can accept this, the less they are tempted to shame children into growing up faster. For instance, it is normal for toddlers to be selfish, possessive, exuberant and curious. It is not unusual for two-year-olds to be unable to wait for something they want, as they don't understand time the way adults do. It is quite ordinary for three-year-olds to be sometimes defiant or hostile. If we shame instead of educate, we interrupt a valuable and stage-appropriate learning process, and our own opportunity to learn about the child's needs is lost.

***Toddlers can be exasperating. But does this mean they're "misbehaving"?***

A three-year-old who defies her mother by refusing to pack up her toys - after being told to do so repeatedly - may be attempting to forge a separate and distinct self-identity. This includes learning to exercise her assertiveness, and learning to navigate open conflict. Toddlers can be exasperating. But does this mean they're "misbehaving"? Sensible limits are essential, but if children are shamed for their fledgling and awkward attempts at autonomy, they are prevented from taking a vital step to maturity and confidence. In the period glibly called the "terrible twos", and for the next couple of years, toddlers are discovering how to set their own boundaries. They are learning to assert their distinct individuality, their sense of will. This is critical if they are to learn how to stand up for themselves, to feel strong

enough to assert themselves, and to resist powerful peer pressures later in life. If we persist in crushing their defiance, and shaming children into submission, we teach them that setting boundaries for themselves is not okay.

Even babies are thought to misbehave, such as when they don't sleep when they are told to. How could a five-month-old baby, for example, possibly be "naughty" for failing to go to sleep? Though it can be difficult for parents when babies experience disturbed sleep, it is nonsensical to see a non-sleeping baby as "disobeying" the parent, and to blame the baby for this.

Consider the example of an eight-month-old who crawls over to something that has flashing lights and interesting sounds. He pulls himself up to it and begins to explore. He does not know that it is his father's prized stereo. He finds himself being tapped on his hand by his mother, who tells him to stop being naughty. He cries. At eight months, a baby is unable to tell the difference between a toy and another's valuable property, and would be incapable of self-restraint if he could. Children's ceaseless curiosity - a frequent target for shaming - is what drives them to learn about the world. When a child's exploration is encouraged in a safe way, rather than castigated, their self-confidence grows. Unfortunately, we frequently call a behavior which may be entirely stage-appropriate "naughty", simply because it threatens our need for order, or creates a burden for us.

A flustered mother and her distraught four-year-old daughter emerge from a local store. The girl is sobbing as she is forcefully strapped into her stroller. "Stop it, you whiner!" screams the mother, as she shakes her finger in the little girl's face. Children are often berated for simply crying. Many people believe that a crying baby or child is misbehaving. Strong expressions of emotion - such as anger and sadness - are the child's natural way of regulating their nervous system, while communicating their needs. Children cry when they are hurting, and they have a right to express this hurt! Even though it is often hard to listen to, it must be remembered that it is a healthy, normal reaction that deserves attention. It is tragic to see how often children are shamed for crying.

Here is a further example of what happens when we are unaware of developmental norms. Until recently, toddlers were started on potty-training far too early, before they were organically capable of voluntary bowel control. Many found this transition to be a battle, and toddlers were commonly shamed and punished for what was a normal inability. What was once a struggle for both parents and children has been greatly alleviated through more accurate information about childhood development. Shaming often takes place when we try to encourage or force a behavior that is developmentally too early for the child's age. We have come a long way in our understanding about child

development in recent decades, and made many advances in childcare as a result. Easy-to-read child-development books fill the stores, by authors such as Penelope Leach, Katie Allison Granju, Pinky McKay and Jan Hunt, and these can help parents to have reasonable and realistic expectations of their children. Children and parents are both happier when parents have reasonable and age-appropriate expectations of their child's behavior.

### **Understanding Instead of Shaming**

Is it possible to understand what motivates children when they are "behaving badly", instead of shaming them? What might "bad" behavior be a reaction to?

When we don't seek to understand a child's "bad" behaviors, we risk neglecting their needs. For instance, sometimes children repeatedly behave aggressively - over and above what can normally be expected of children their age. This could be due to conflict in the home, bullying at school, or competition with a sibling. Often what we expediently label as "bad" behavior is a vital signal that the child in question might actually be hurting. Research has repeatedly shown that a consistent pattern of antisocial behaviors, for example hostility and bullying, are children's reactions to having felt victimized in some way. Children often "act out" their hurts aggressively, when they have not found a safe way to show that they have been hurt.

Ironically, shame itself can be the underlying cause of difficult behavior. Since shaming is a judgment from someone with more power than the child, this makes the child feel small and powerless. Sometimes, children turn the tables: they reclaim this lost power by finding another person to push around - usually someone smaller or more vulnerable than themselves.

Children are usually highly sensitive to the "vibes" in their environment; they pick up tensions between their parents, or other family members. At times "naughty" behavior may be the child's way of reacting to this tension.

Children are less given to act out when they are receiving enough attention, when their hunger for play, discovery and pleasurable human contact is satisfied. Provocative behavior can indicate boredom, or perhaps the need for another "dose" of happy engagement with someone who is not feeling irritable, someone who has the time and energy to spare.

Finally, children can be grumpy or "difficult" simply from over-tiredness. In this case, what is dismissed as "bad" behavior might be a child's way of saying "I'm over the edge, and I can't handle it".

Curiously enough, when we as parents react with verbal assaults, we are communicating the same thing. Isn't yelling at children that they are "naughty" or "terrible" (or worse) a kind of adult tantrum, a



dysfunctional adult way of coping with frustration?

It is worth remembering that some causes of "misbehavior" are a lot less obvious. For instance, children need to feel our strength - they are uncomfortable with weakness in our personal boundaries. They need exposure to our true feelings, and they sense when we are hiding or pretending. They need their feelings and opinions validated, and are highly sensitive to poor empathy. Frequently, they react to any of these conditions by becoming provocative. Sometimes we blame and shame children for their vexing behavior, because the causes are hard to see.

### **Cultivating Empathy: Through Remembering**

Parents often do to their children as was done to them. It is known that violence can be passed down through generations. Many parents realize that they are perpetuating a cycle in which they are shaming their children, in the same ways that they were once shamed by their own parents. Those that have forgotten the sting and humiliation of being shamed, risk being insensitive to the shame they inflict on their own children. Change requires deepening one's empathy toward the child, and this comes from remembering how it felt to be a child. The understanding that comes from seeing the world through a child's eyes can help adults to influence children without shaming them.

### **Managing Emotions**

As parents, it is not unusual to find ourselves struggling, frazzled, or nearing an emotional boiling-point. When we don't find healthy ways to discharge this frustration, we risk taking it out on our children. Although irritation is a normal part of parenting, this is not because children are "too demanding". Children are children, and the fact that child-rearing can be difficult is not their fault. There are many ways to reroute our excess anger, such as chopping wood, going for a walk, or talking our frustration through with friends.

Everyone's capacity for loving patience is finite; that's human. When parents experience excessive strain this is largely due to our adherence to the myth that it takes just two adults to raise a child. Our society has grossly underestimated the energy required to truly meet children's needs. We can avoid shaming simply by sharing the load - by asking for, and accepting, practical help from trusted friends and community. When we hear ourselves shaming our children, we might take this as a sign that we are needing more assistance.

### **What Do We Do Now? A New Paradigm for Boundary Setting**

Respectful boundary-setting implies a strong statement about you, as opposed to a negative statement about the child. In this way, children gradually develop a good capacity to hear and comprehend the feelings of others. Children benefit from open expression of emotions; from seeing when their parents are angry, or upset. It is OK to be

angry with your children, to let them see you are annoyed at something they have done, (as long as you don't shock or terrorize them). Children learn best when they can see the kind of impact their behavior has on the feelings of others. Finally, it helps children to listen to and respect your feelings, if their right to express their feelings is equally respected.

### **Redirecting the Child's Impulses**

From time to time, we are compelled to intervene in our child's activity, when we fear that either a person or a treasured object might get hurt. Shaming can be avoided if, instead of just chastising or stopping the child, we also provide a safer, alternative activity. Occasional aggression is part of normal, balanced healthy development. Children are often shamed and punished for this, when instead they could be shown ways to channel their natural aggression safely. Sometimes it is important to re-evaluate whether we need to chastise at all. A guideline comes from considering whether the behavior in question is actually causing harm to anyone, or creating a concrete risk.

### **The Role Model**

Role-modeling is the most powerful teaching tool. Children don't do what you say, they do as you do. The kind of respect they show others and themselves is a reflection of the kind of respect they have themselves been shown - and the respect they have witnessed displayed between the important people in their lives. Are we role-modeling the kind of behavior that we want our children to display?

### **Conclusion**

Many people are still convinced that smacking or shaming are the only antidotes for preventing antisocial behaviors in children. The suggestion of giving up shaming or smacking is misinterpreted by some as attempts to disempower parents; to turn them into guilt-laden, ineffectual and permissive wimps. Not so. The most effective and healthy boundaries can be set without resorting to violence or shaming. Being strong with children does not mean being harsh, or humiliating.

There are alternatives to shaming that are healthier and more effective. Children who are shown consistent boundaries by parents who are able to express their feelings and needs in a trusting and respectful way, grow up with stronger self-worth and social awareness, free of the toxic effects of shame.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Allestree, *The Whole Duty of Man* (London, 1766), p.20.

Editor's note: See "The Myth of Original Sin" for a conflicting theory formulated by Arminius in the same century.

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