

UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO SHAME IN CHILDREN - FOR EDUCATION STAFF

As school staff, there are times when you need to set limits and say 'no' in order to protect children from hurting themselves or others. Boundaries and limit-setting are helpful for children. Not only can they help keep children and others safe, but it can help them understand that:

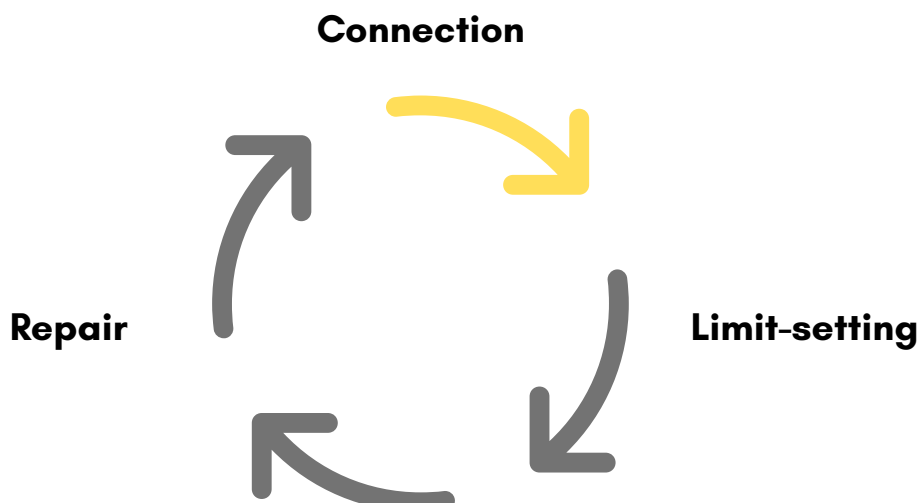
- People give different responses in different situations
- "If I behave in certain ways, I can avoid the experience of shame"
- "My behaviour affects others", which is the start of the development of empathy

When an adult sets a boundary, children can experience feelings of shame through interpreting that they are bad rather than their behaviour is bad. When children experience shame, they often become quiet or try to hide. Some children might also deny they did anything wrong, become angry, or blame others to reduce feelings of shame (see Shield of Shame section). You can recognise these behaviours and reconnect instantly by repairing the relationship, connecting with the child, and showing them how to do the activity appropriately. By doing this, children experience small manageable amounts of shame.

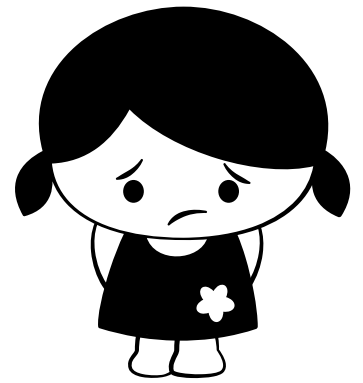
This is the easiest time to teach them:

**"It's not you,
it's the
BEHAVIOUR"**

The process of managing feelings of shame is done through connecting with the child, setting limits when needed, and repairing any relationship difficulties through empathy and acceptance.



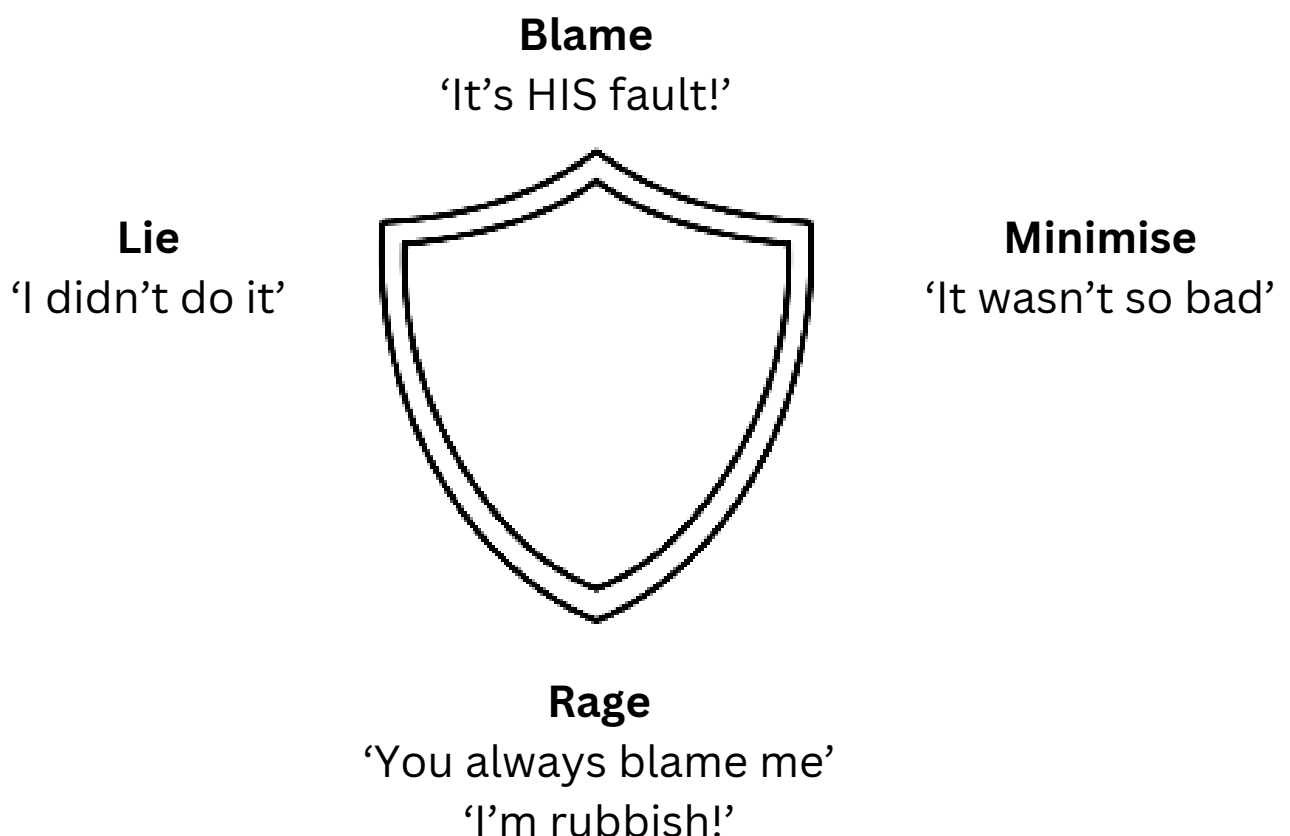
However, the experience and impact of shame are very different if a child has a history of difficult experiences and/or traumas. Some difficult experiences (e.g., being screamed at, being bullied, being left out or left alone) can leave children feeling that “there is something wrong with me” and they can develop a lasting feeling of shame.



‘SHIELD AGAINST SHAME’

(Golding & Hughes, 2012)

Experiencing shame is difficult for children, especially if the repair does not happen after limit-setting. They do not learn that “I am not the problem; the behaviour was the problem”. If they constantly experience feelings of shame, or those feelings become unmanageable then children develop a ‘shield against shame’ to protect themselves from it. The shield can involve minimising what they did “it wasn’t that bad”, blaming others, denying what they did, acting tough “I don’t care”, and becoming very angry. When children have a ‘shield against shame’, they find it very difficult to learn from their behaviour or consider other points of view.



WHAT YOU CAN DO TO REDUCE SHAME

When a child is doing something inappropriate or dangerous (e.g., throws things), it is normal to set boundaries (e.g., saying "You must not throw things in the class "). This will naturally result in the child experiencing feelings of shame (e.g., they might go quiet, look away, make themselves smaller, or hide). This is the right time to repair the relationship, to help reduce the child's experience of shame.

THINGS YOU CAN SAY TO REPAIR:

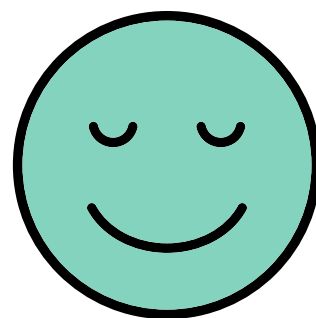


Take the child aside and try these phrases (depending on your role)..

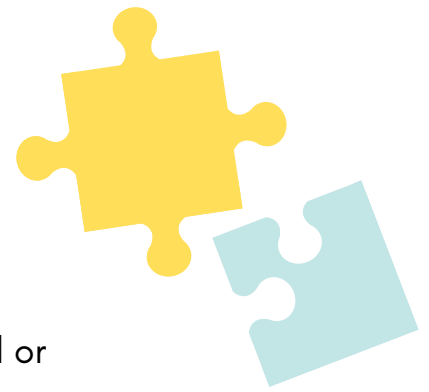
- "We don't throw things in class because I don't want you or anyone to get hurt, we care about you"
- "I'm sorry that I had to shout then. I want everyone to be safe, including you. Thank you for talking with me."
- "I think you were trying to tell me that you were upset earlier. I got very confused, didn't I. I wonder if you were feeling upset because..."
- "That was difficult, wasn't it. Shall we go and play outside, I enjoy doing that with you!"
- "These next five minutes are all yours. What shall we do together?"
- "I know it's not a very nice feeling when things are tense. It makes me feel upset, and I'm wondering if it makes you feel upset too."

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO REPAIR:

- Use a ***PACE-ful approach** (of Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) to convey continuing and unconditional acceptance of the child, regardless of their behaviour. Try to view their behaviour as a form of communication – what feelings or needs are they trying to express? This is likely to enhance the empathy you feel for them, and allow for more nurturing interactions. See 'PACE for education staff' resource on our website for more information.
- Support the child to **regulate** themselves, prior to reasoning with them. Focus on strategies that calm them (and you) down, before you talk with them about their behaviour. If you see them respond with the shield of shame (with lying, denial, rage, minimising or blaming) then you likely need to focus on strategies that calm and relax them first. **Helping them feel seen, heard, loved and believed** in is more important than creating a plan of action in regards to their behaviour right now. See 'Regulation ideas for your and your class' resource on our website for more information.
- **Repair the relationship and re-connect** with the child after the rupture in the relationship. This is a really important step, as it allows the child to understand that it was their behaviour that you disliked, not them as a person.
- Remember that **it is OK to say "sorry" first** if you are responsible for part of the rupture. It is ok to admit, apologise, say how you are feeling, tell how you'll fix the situation and promise the child you'll do differently next time.



- **Do something you both enjoy.** You might want to play together, draw or engage in other creative activities.
- Use **relational games** (e.g., feelings hung, mirror game, scavenger hunt) that can promote connection with the child or young person, support them to build trust and feel comfortable in the relationship. You can find more information about these games in the 'Relational games and creative tools' resource.
- **Leave them a note of kindness** (e.g., "Thank you for helping me today " " Thank you for being so kind with your classmates today")



This resource has been developed using a range of ideas and sources such as:

- Golding, K. & Hughes, D. (2012). Creating Loving Attachments. Parenting with PACE to nurture confidence and security in the troubled child. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Golding, K. S, Philips, S. & Bombér, L. (2021) Working with relational trauma in schools: An educator's guide to using Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy
- Hughes, D. (2017) Building the Bonds of Attachment: Awakening Love in Deeply Traumatized Children (3rd Ed).
- Trauma-Informed Schools <https://www.traumainformedschools.co.uk/>

Visit www.cavyoungwellbeing.wales for Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health information and resources for children, young people, parents and professionals.

Originally created by the Resilience Project team (2021) and adapted by School In-Reach Service (2024).
This document is available in Welsh / Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg