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Shame Solutions: How Shame Impacts School-Aged Children and What Teachers Can Do to Help

by Ann Monroe

Abstract

Though many psychologists and researchers argue over the age at which humans first experience shame, all agree that by age two children have the capacity to be shamed (Lansky and Morrison 1997). School-aged children have invariably been exposed to shame at home and receive an extra dose of it in our current school system. This essay investigates shame theory and explores how societal shaming practices manifest themselves in our schools, specifically examining the negative effects of shame on human development. Alternative pedagogical strategies—those that avoid shame and shaming—are discussed and endorsed.

One could argue that no social institution plays a greater role than schools in influencing the course of a child's life. Today's schools are responsible for the intellectual, emotional, and physical development of the children they serve. This enormous task brings with it enormous responsibility. Every tool, resource, strategy, practice, and word used with children has an impact on their development. Because of the amount of influence a single educator can have, evaluating the effectiveness and appropriateness of these practices is important.

The social and emotional development of children begins at home and is continued in the school setting. Interactions with peers and adults play an important role in the way children see themselves. Schools present many opportunities for children to feel a sense of weakness or failure. When children see themselves as deficient or having failed in some way, they experience a sense of shame. Pattison (2000, 41) defined shame as "the feeling we have when we evaluate our actions, feelings, or

behavior, and conclude that we have done wrong. It encompasses the whole of ourselves; it generates a wish to hide, to disappear, or even to die.”

To determine which educational practices induce shame in children requires an understanding of the concept of shame and how it manifests itself in the human psyche. This essay begins with a brief overview of shame, followed by a discussion of shaming practices in education. Then the essay suggests strategies for reducing the harmful effects of shame in educational settings.

Shame: An Overview

Shame is as natural an emotion as anger or fear. In fact, psychologist Silvan Tomkins (1963) listed shame as one of the nine “primary affects” innate to all humans. All nine affects manifest themselves in a human’s facial and physical characteristics. For instance, the affect of enjoyment is expressed with a smile and a sparkle in the eyes; the affect of excitement, with an open mouth and raised eyebrows; the affect of disgust with the upper lip raised, nose wrinkled, and head drawn back. Often, shame is also visible. In its purest form, the affect of shame is expressed with a lowered head, facial blushing, and the avoidance of eye contact.

Shame has as many definitions as it does investigators. Leitch’s (1999, 1) definition, however, seems to encompass the commonalities of most: “Shame is generally viewed as a private, self-conscious experience in which individuals feel that a weakness or vulnerability has been exposed not only to others, but also to themselves, leaving them feeling deficient and humiliated.” Shame must have an audience. We feel shame when our weaknesses are exposed to an “other.” Most often the other is another person, but when shame becomes internalized, that other is our own critical eye. When shame is internalized, we become the witnesses to our weaknesses, and our sense of self-worth is diminished (Schenk and Everingham 1995).

When we internalize shame, it becomes part of our identity. In early development, we also internalize how we are treated by others and what others say about us. These internalizations become the basis for our identities and our sense of self. When interactions with others are negative in nature, we develop a negative identity. In other words, we begin to see ourselves through the same negative lens as those around us. Alternately, when our interactions with others are positive and reaffirming, we develop a positive sense of identity or sense of self (Kaufman 1992).

Unlike the outward physical expressions of pure shame (lowered head, blushing, and averted eyes), internalized shame is almost never visible. This opacity makes shame difficult to recognize and may be one of the reasons why shame studies have historically been neglected in the fields of psychology and philosophy.

There is much to learn about shame and its effect on the human psyche; only in the last 30 years has shame received the attention it deserves. Researchers and clinicians like Donald Nathanson, director of the Silvan S. Tomkins Institute, are taking the pioneering work of Tomkins’s Affect Theory to another level. They are helping to define what triggers

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shame and how this shame manifests itself in our society.

Nathanson (2000) listed ability, skill level, competition, sexuality, gender, personal attractiveness, and a sense of self as possible triggers of shame. Perceived failure or weakness in any of these areas can trigger a shame experience. We encounter these triggers in various settings and at different times in our lives. Interactions with parents, caregivers, siblings, teachers, peers, and

even strangers color the way we see ourselves and have an impact on our emotional development.

Some of our earliest shame experiences are those tied to gender. When an infant is born, we tend to assign him or her certain characteristics based on gender. Males are “expected to excel at doing,” and females are “expected to excel at being” (Schenk and Everingham 1995, 17). When a male fails to excel at achieving, his sense of failure is linked to a failure of the self. When we feel our inner selves have failed, we feel shame. The same can be applied to females. When a female fails to behave or to be kind and nurturing, she has failed in her role as a female. Her sense of self suffers, and shame results. According to Schenk and Everingham, differences in shame experiences between males and females are real and easily identifiable. Because the shame experience is intrinsically tied to our feelings of self-worth, it makes sense that when we fail in our societal roles, we experience shame.

Functions of Shame

If we are to believe that shame is innate, then one would reason that everyone is capable of experiencing shame and that shame must serve some kind of important function. John Bradshaw (1988) outlined the functions of what he called “healthy shame.” According to Bradshaw, healthy shame functions as a reminder that we are human and that we are supposed to make mistakes. Healthy shame helps us set limits and use our energy in constructive and realistic ways.

Erik Erikson’s (1950) Theory of Psychosocial Development employed shame theory and gave us another way to look at the positive functions of shame. Erickson’s theory, like Jean Piaget’s cognitive theory, was presented as stages through which an individual journeys. Erickson’s second stage involves early childhood and the time when an individual begins to test the boundaries of autonomy while avoiding shame and doubt. According to Erickson, the goal is to become as independent as possible to develop a sense of independence and self-esteem. A child who is not given the opportunity to explore and test boundaries or who is discouraged and reprimanded for doing so will be enveloped by a sense of shame and will doubt his or her ability to complete important everyday tasks. Too much freedom and independence, however, can lead to what Erickson called *impulsiveness*. This impulsiveness creates the false notion that one can do anything. Individuals who are impulsive do not

consider the limits of their own abilities. A healthy dose of shame and doubt balanced with a proper amount of independence and freedom is beneficial and counteracts impulsivity.

Another function of shame, often discussed, is that shame is a regulator of social behavior. When social rules or norms are violated and those violations affect the interaction between individuals, the violator may feel a sense of shame in breaking the interpersonal bridge that connects them with others (Kaufman 1992). Shame acts almost as an admittance of wrongdoing and clears a pathway for forgiveness and acceptance. The break in the interpersonal bridge is restored and, subsequently, the individuals can continue the relationship (Pattison 2000).

Last, shame can function as a moral regulator. Family and society help shape our sense of morality. When we step outside the bounds of what we consider moral and right, we feel a sense of shame in our wrongdoing. This feeling signals us to contemplate our transgressions and moderate our behavior (Bradshaw 1988; Pattison 2000).

Research has shown that shame is a “life cycle” phenomenon occurring from birth to death, and that some shame experiences can be a healthy function of life (Kaufman 1992). However, healthy emotions can turn toxic when one experiences the emotion over and over again. Shame is an emotion that easily becomes toxic because of our ability and propensity for reliving shame experiences. Tomkins (1963) theorized that affective experiences are stored in the brain as “scenes.” These scenes are played over and over again and have the potential to repeatedly trigger shame throughout one’s life. This internalized shame is destructive and leads to long-term negative feelings of worthlessness.

Shame so easily moves from functional to toxic because of our capacity to relive shaming situations. Once we have experienced shame in the presence of another person, we can relive that experience over and over again by becoming our own audience.

The overriding view of psychologists is that shame is an overwhelmingly destructive emotion. Though shame is seen by some to be a functioning regulator, its volatile nature makes it an emotion that is best avoided (Nathanson 2000). Many experts in the fields of psychology and psychopathology have argued that shame was used to serve adaptive functions in earlier stages of human evolution, but that the complexity of our current emotional and cognitive states makes shame a destructive emotion that serves no adaptive function (Tangney and Dearing 2002). Other more benevolent emotions, such as guilt and embarrassment, can serve the same regulatory function as shame without the potential for becoming an internalized, damaging force to our sense of self (Morrison 1998).

Even though guilt and embarrassment are related to the shame affect, research has shown that these emotions are less intense and carry far less destructive potential than shame. Tangney et al. (1996) conducted research to determine whether individuals saw shame, guilt, and embarrassment as distinct emotions. The study involved 182 undergraduates at a large state university. The students were asked to provide narrative accounts of times when they felt shame, guilt, and embarrassment. Participants also were asked a series of structured questions in which they rated their shame, guilt, and embarrassment experiences on a scale ranging from 1 (*mild feelings*) to 5 (*the most adverse reactions and feelings*).

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The study indicated that shame, guilt, and embarrassment were seen as different and distinct emotions. Shame experiences were rated as the most severe and disruptive. The participants related feeling isolated, diminished, and inferior to others when experiencing shame. The experiences that elicited feelings of guilt and embarrassment were seen as far less destructive. These findings support shame theorists' beliefs that shame, especially internalized shame, has negative long-term consequences, including the power to diminish self-esteem and disrupt self-conceptions.

The negative and destructive nature of shame makes the need to investigate how shame affects school-aged children imperative. Many of the shame triggers Nathanson (2000) identified—ability, skill level, competition, and sense of self—are encountered in the school setting. As many researchers have noted, school is often children's first nonfamilial experience and their initiation into society (Broucek 1997; Tangney and Dearing 2002). School children are expected to learn and grow both intellectually and emotionally. Teachers and administrators are there to guide children through this journey and support their efforts of self-discovery. Students' experiences in school are meant to be positive and rewarding but, far too often, the very nature and structure of our schools creates a negative and unwelcoming environment. Underlying many of these negative experiences in the schoolhouse is the emotion of shame.

Shame in Education

The dunce cap is one of the oldest forms of shame-based pedagogy. The wearer of the cap is pronounced stupid and ill-equipped for learning in front of a room of his or her peers. This is the epitome of shame. The dunce cap is no longer used in schools, but there are a multitude of other techniques that have the potential of inducing a shame experience in the children that fill the seats of every classroom.

Some children experience shame through the words or actions of insensitive teachers. Many can remember a remark uttered by a teacher such as, "What are you, stupid?," or "You just aren't smart enough to do that problem." These types of hurtful comments can be sources of great shame. Teachers have tremendous emotional power in the classroom, and this power is dangerous if it is used to control and demean children (Kaufman 1992).

Often, an unkind word or direct insult is not what initiates shame in children, but rather a teacher's apathy. Many children who have difficulties in school are simply passed from grade to grade without ever learning the basic skills necessary for a productive life. These children grow to know themselves as failures and are continuously shamed by their perceived weaknesses. In *Read with Me*, Walter Anderson (1990) shared personal stories from individuals who suffered at the hands of apathetic teachers. One of those individuals, Percy Fleming (Anderson 1990, 79), offered the following memory from his childhood:

I was one of at least four students—and there were probably more—who could not read in third grade. But we were passed anyway, maybe because we weren't troublesome, or maybe because no one noticed. It became harder and harder for me to keep up in those early years until finally, in the fourth grade, I was lost. I don't think I really understood as a child what I was missing, or how far behind I was getting, but by the time I reached seventh grade I knew: I couldn't read. . . . I became so good at pretending I could read, I even fooled my mother.

Percy Fleming's account is similar to those of many others. He was ignored by apathetic teachers and denied the help he so desperately needed. When he realized how far behind he was falling, he began to hide his inability to read. According to Lewis (1971, 15), "shame has an intrinsic tendency to encourage hiding." No one wants to be exposed as a failure, so individuals hide the things they despise about themselves. The decisions teachers make in terms of their own behavior can have enormous consequences for the children they teach.

Other forces are involved, however, that can affect the emotional development of school-aged children. Within the institution of schools, children are expected to learn and acquire skills. School children therein are faced with challenges on a daily basis. With every new challenge comes the possibility of success or failure, which brings the risk of shame (Tangney and Dearing 2002).

Broucek (1997, 58) reminded us that the opposite of shame is pride. He stated that in the school setting, "Pride and shame are closely connected with issues of competence, efficacy, the successful meeting of standards and rules, and achievement of goals." The concept of a shame-pride axis is essential to a study examining shame and education. For some children, the educational experience is enveloped by a sense of pride in one's achievements. For others, the educational experience elicits feelings of shame and self-doubt. All children enter a learning environment with a slight sense of shame in not knowing. When everyone is in the same boat, so to speak, the effect of shame is limited or completely diminished. When some learners advance and others do not, however, comparisons are made and shame is perpetuated.

For those learners who struggle to meet the challenges of classroom life, shame is inevitable. Many pedagogical practices highlight only these students' struggles. Ability grouping in reading and math, for example, leaves children's weaknesses exposed. No matter what name you call the groups, everyone knows that the yellow birds, hedgehogs, or Flintstones are the "slower learners." These feelings of shame from exposure also are seen as a result of other pedagogical practices. Some children do not want their weaknesses exposed to their fellow classmates, yet teachers continue the practice of letting students exchange papers for grading. The student who struggles with spelling, for example, may fail miserably on every test, and yet is forced to exchange his or her paper with another, which exposes the weakness.

Academic failures are not the only aspects of school life that leave children open to shame; children also learn socialization skills in school. Behavior expectations, rules, and procedures are an important part of any classroom. Many classroom management techniques used by teachers are potential shame producers. Writing children's names on the board when an infraction has occurred or making a child move his desk to the corner are both forms of public humiliation and can result in shame (Tangney and Dearing 2002).

Because school is a place for socialization, the peer group also can be a potential source of shame. Kaufman (1992, 200) listed the formation of cliques, teasing and ridicule, and physical bullying as sources of "considerable shame" from ones' own peers. This type of shame can be continuous and long lasting as it is perpetuated year after year.

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The sources of school-induced shame are many. Teachers and peers are oftentimes contributors to a child's shame and sense of worthlessness. With changes in attitude and pedagogy, however, teachers can reduce the potential for shame in the classroom.

Solutions to School-Induced Shame

Some common school-induced shame triggers include academic struggles, ability grouping, inappropriate classroom management techniques, peer teasing and bullying, teacher apathy, and insensitive or hostile teachers and administrators. Identifying school practices, teacher actions, and peer interactions that induce shame is the first step in making school a better place to learn and grow. The next step is to search out and promote alternative pedagogical strategies that reduce or eliminate shame responses in children. This section focuses on these more positive strategies and solutions.

Shame Solutions: Academic Failure

Because school is a place for trying new things and facing new challenges, failure is inevitable. Teachers can help cushion the blow of failure by helping children cope with disappointment. Open and frank discussions about one's attempts at new tasks helps dissolve the urge to hide and thus eliminates feelings of shame. These honest discussions always should emphasize the positive while evaluating areas where additional work is needed. Student-teacher conferences, portfolio evaluations, and immediate feedback can help to diminish the possibility of shame.

Shame Solutions: Ability Grouping

Research has shown that ability grouping can create problems for students in the classroom. Often the grouping is inflexible and a student stays in the same group all year; perhaps even year after year (Davenport et al. 1998). Good and Brophy (2002) found that the instruction lower groups receive is usually of lesser quality and does not allow for critical thinking and problem solving. However, heterogeneous grouping has been found to work well for all students regardless of ability level. Children keep their dignity and learn from one another when allowed to interact with all members of their learning community.

Even with the documented drawbacks, teachers continue to use ability grouping. Eggen and Kauchak (2007) provided suggestions for teachers who continue the practice of ability grouping but would like to diminish the negative effects. They suggested that groups should remain as flexible as possible. Students should be able to move in and out of groups as they learn and grow. The quality of instruction and the expectations for learning should remain high for every group. All students should be learning to problem solve and think critically. Finally, lower achieving groups should not be labeled using negative terminology.

Shame Solutions: Classroom Management

Classroom management can be a teacher's most difficult task. To create a positive and successful classroom environment, rules, procedures, and consequences must be enforced. Students should be held accountable for their actions; yet, as Tangney and Dearing (2002, 184) stated, "accentuate the behavior, and not the person." Avoid discipline techniques that rely on ridicule or public announcements of guilt to control student behavior. Instead, allow for natural consequences and provide students with privacy when discussing their indiscretions.

Shame Solutions: Peer Teasing and Bullying

Teachers can be a source of information and guidance when it comes to appropriate interactions within peer groups. Children should be taught how to treat others and how to handle conflicts. Teachers need to be aware of any teasing that goes on in the classroom, playground, or lunchroom, and must be willing to intervene when necessary. Also, conflict resolution techniques can be taught to students in the hope of reducing bullying and school violence.

Dan Olweus (2003, 13) created a program to reduce bullying in the classroom. The principles of the program center on the following:

- warmth, positive interest, and involvement from adults;
- firm limits on unacceptable behavior;
- consistent application of nonpunitive and nonphysical sanctions for unacceptable behavior or violations of rules; and
- positive role modeling by adults who act as authorities.

Olweus reported that his bullying prevention program has reduced bullying by more than one half in the schools that have used the program. Olweus listed several important components of the program that lead to success: training for faculty and staff; effective monitoring of lunch and recess; clearly stated rules concerning bullying, classroom discussions, and parental involvement; and teacher–student conferences with bullies and victims.

Shame Solutions: Teacher Apathy

The recent emphasis on standardized testing and the movement toward standards-based education can be seen as both positive and negative. Though many argue about the appropriateness of high-stakes testing, both the use of these tests and the push for standards-based instruction may have a positive impact by reducing teacher apathy. Social promotion is no longer the norm. Teachers are not able to easily pass a student from grade to grade unless the child is able to meet the requirements of that particular grade level. This emphasis on skill acquisition and the meeting of grade-level standards may help mitigate the risk of shame as teachers find ways to help every student in the classroom regardless of ability.

Shame Solutions: Insensitive or Hostile Teachers and Administrators

Finding a solution to the problem of insensitive and hostile teachers and school personnel may be the most difficult challenge. Often, administrators and parents are unaware of the torment students suffer due to the words or actions of educators. Children are afraid to talk about what has been said to them and feel a sense of shame that they are victims of such hateful treatment. After all, a shamed child may feel that he or she is the cause of the teacher's negative attitude. The child may feel that the mistreatment was somehow deserved. The solution to the problem of insensitive teachers lies in the recruitment and retention of quality teacher candidates.

Many schools of education are beginning to measure preservice teachers' dispositions. Dispositions are defined as those "patterns of behavior," such as caring attitudes and sensitivity, that effective teachers possess (Katz 1993, 10). Teacher preparation programs have long measured preservice teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, but measuring

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dispositions now has become a part of the assessment process. This emphasis on dispositions may help to diminish the number of insensitive and ineffective teachers in the classroom.

Conclusion

Shame is a real and potentially devastating emotion, impacting each of us at one time or another. A sense of worthlessness and an urge to hide or cover those feelings can harm the human psyche in ways researchers and psychologists are still uncovering. Social institutions, such as schools, have a responsibility to nurture and guide our youngest citizens; however, all too often, these very institutions perpetuate the cycle of shame. Acknowledging these failures and finding ways to stop the cycle are vital steps in the healing of shame and the healthy development and educational success of students.

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