

## Helping Young Kids Overcome Shame

By [Dr. Michael Obsatz](#)

*Shame is very pervasive in America. Most people have some amount of shame. Some people have been hurt, abandoned, abused, neglected and ridiculed, and have enormous amounts of shame. Books have been written about how shame develops, and what it is. Probably the most well-known author about shame is John Bradshaw, but other authors who have written about shame include Gershen Kaufman, Merle Fossum and Marilyn Mason.*

**Shame is a feeling of being unloveable at one's core** -- worthless, undeserving, weak, vulnerable and insignificant. This feeling starts early in life -- from childhood. The child hears or feels the shaming messages, and then internalizes them. Young children put themselves down in words and actions. Shame is about disconnection from self, others, and life in general. A shame-based person feels like an outsider looking in, a marginalized individual. Many shame-based people suffer from a lack of trust -- in themselves, in others, and in life. Shame robs kids of their internal sense of personal power.

**Shame-based young people often do things that reinforce their unworthiness** -- they steal, act out, lie and push others around. Self-sabotage is a big part of shame. When a child feels worthless, they blame themselves for everything that happens, and also tend to blame others. It becomes a shame-blame game.

Can shame ever be helpful? Some say “yes,” but it is my belief they are talking about healthy humility. Bradshaw claims that there is “healthy” shame and “toxic” shame. I believe all shame is ultimately toxic.

While guilt is about feeling bad about what one does, shame is feeling bad about who one is. Guilt about a misbehavior can spiral into shame if the child has enough internalized shame already.

**Who shames kids?** Parents, teachers, siblings, peers, relatives, clergy to name a few. Also, we live in a culture that makes money from people not feeling good about who they are. They search for good feelings through buying things and having things. But external things do not really help a shame-based person feel better.

**What are other behaviors that may signify that shame is present?** Shame-based kids are often critical and hostile. They may become caretakers and co-dependent to try to feel better about themselves. Some shame-based kids are grandiose and arrogant. These defenses cover up the hurt inside.

Other kids use intellectualizing as a way of not feeling the pain of shame. Shame-based kids are not usually honest and open about their feelings. They try to be perfect, and maintain control in all situations. Shame-based kids need to feel some sense of power over others because they feel powerless about their own lives.

Boys and girls receive shaming cultural messages about how they should look, dress and act. Boys should be tough and independent, not cry, and not be vulnerable. They should never ask for help or directions. Girls should be pretty, thin, popular, and not too visibly smart. Girls learn to be indirect about their anger, and it often comes out sideways through sarcasm and joking. Messages for both genders are limiting, and involve a loss of authenticity. If they are not allowed to be who they really are, then who they really are is NOT okay.

**Shame is strongly connected to addictive behavior.** Addicts try to hide their shame by using substances, processes, or people to feel better about themselves. Most people in America are addicted to some substance -- alcohol, sugar, caffeine, nicotine, salt. Some are workaholics, gamblers, and compulsive shoppers.

While kids in America may appear not to be addicts, many of them have become addicted to videogames and sugar. Close to half of America's kids are overweight, and have the potential to be obese adults.

Shame-based people develop faulty thinking patterns which include either/or thinking, generalizing, and labeling. The thinking patterns of shame-based people keep them feeling bad about themselves and others. The world is seen through a limited lens, and gray areas are avoided. Shame and blame become predominant modes of acting.

**To overcome shame, a child must begin to feel loved for the very one that they are.** This means a rebirth of self, of spirit, of personal and interpersonal connection. Anyone working with kids can help them overcome shame. They must be reinforced for being worthy and loveable. This needs to happen often from someone they can learn to trust. Trust is the first step, and empowerment is the second step. Kids need to feel competent and capable, and have a sense of their own healthy power. This is a long and complicated process.

***First, an adult role model, mentor, teacher, or parent must take a genuine interest in the child. Then, that adult must model healthy, mature, empowered behavior. Then, the child must be encouraged to stop all shame-based and self-sabotaging behaviors. This includes faulty thinking, blaming, and impulsive acting out.***

Empowerment means loving oneself, and trust one's own ability to cope with situations appropriately. All children can be empowered if they are willing and ready. The problem is that while an adult may be encouraging empowerment, the family may continue to shame the child. The child is then torn between loyalty to the parents, and loyalty to an outside adult influence. Shame-based parents may be threatened by a healthy, empowered, adult role model.

Kids with shame may become the addicts, anorexics, bulleemics, suicide victims, learning disabled, underachievers, bullies, and victims. But they may also be the teacher's pet, and the high achiever. It is time to understand shame and its negative effects, and do something about it.

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