



Why it's Important to Teach Kids about Shame

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Shame. We all feel it and for all of us it feels awful. We are born with this affect. We don't have to learn it. The shame family of emotions spans hundreds of different feeling words like humiliation, embarrassment, mortification, chasten, among others. Dr. Donald L. Nathanson M.D., founding Executive Director Emeritus of the Tomkins Institute, tells us that wherever there are hurt feelings, there is shame.

Like all other emotions, shame has an important function that promotes survival of our species. I want to take you on a journey, right back to the basic biological function of shame. To do this, we will stop talking about *emotion* for a little while and instead look at what the late American Psychologist Silvan Tomkins called the *affects*.

The Nine Innate Affects

Silvan Tomkins taught us that all humans are born with nine hardwired biological affect programs that operate from the moment we are born until the day we die. These, Tomkins called *The Nine Innate Affects*. How did Tomkins know we are born with these affects? One way was through his studies of the expression of emotion in babies. Tomkins observed that there were nine sets of responses to situations, each characterised by a particular set of facial, vocal and bodily reactions that was the same for all infants. He concluded that all of us are born with nine,

...nothing makes its way into our conscious awareness until it pushes one of these affect buttons. Humans can only 'feel' if an affect has been triggered. Tomkins taught us that affects are the biological programs that lie underneath every possible human emotion.

preprogrammed affects that are biological basis of all human emotion. These *affect programs* can be imagined as nine buttons, each pressed by a specific type and density of sensory input from our senses – from our environment, sometimes from within our bodies. When an affect button is pressed, a set of involuntary physiological reactions are initiated. Enjoyment-Joy brings a smile or a laugh as well as other para-sympathetic responses such as relaxed muscles and lowered heart rate.

Two of these affects that Tomkins named *interest-excitement* and *enjoyment-joy* (mentioned above) are the biological affects underlying anything that *feels good* – anything we want more of. There are six other affects, of which one is *shame*, that underlie anything that feels bad or stressful – anything we want to experience less of. Another affect, Tomkins called *surprise-startle*, feels neither good nor bad.

Positive Affects

- Interest – Excitement
- Enjoyment – Joy

Neutral Affect

- Surprise – Startle

Negative Affects

- Anger – Rage
- Fear – Terror
- Distress – Anguish
- Disgust
- Dissmell
- Shame – Humiliation

Tomkins taught us that we can only notice something (a stimulus) when it triggers one of these nine affect *programs*. In other words, nothing makes its way into our conscious awareness until it *pushes* one of these *affect buttons*. Humans can only 'feel' if an affect has been triggered. Tomkins taught us that affects are the biological programs that lie underneath every possible human emotion.

Each of these affects evolved to motivate our behaviour in a direction that will maximise our chance of survival.

Affect is the entirely innate and involuntary biological basis underlying our experience of any emotion.

Feelings are what we experience when we become consciously aware that an affect has been triggered. We become aware through our body's programmed physiological responses to the affect (e.g.; shame affect may cause us to blush and lose muscle tone in our neck as we slump and hang our head).

Emotions occur when the triggering of an affect sets off a search through memory for other times this affect was triggered for instructions of what to say and to *this time*, based on past learning. Emotions drive behaviour in the present based on stored memories (scripts) about what we believe has worked in the past.

Emotions are the result of biology (affect) + biography (memory).

Affects promote survival

Each of these affects evolved to motivate our behaviour in a direction that will maximise our chance of survival. *Interest-Excitement* is the affect underneath the drive to learn - to master something in our environment. *Enjoyment-Joy* signals to us all is well. *Surprise-Startle* orients our attention to a sudden, extreme and brief stimulus (like a tiger pouncing from the bushes). *Anger-Rage* motivates us to act to take care of an unpleasant stimulus quickly (fight), *Fear-Terror* motivates us to run, or be very still. *Disgust* evolved to make us expel anything we may have ingested that turned out to be toxic, and *Dissmell* is an avoidance signal to keep away from bad (smelly) food that may be poisonous. We will leave shame for the moment.

Affects are highly contagious

We *catch* affects from one another. Being around people who are experiencing the affects of interest or joy tends to be interesting and joyful to us – those same affects have been triggered in us. When people laugh, we laugh with them, even though we may not know why. Their laughter triggered our laughter. A child roaring in full-throated rage can trigger anger in those near them. The wail of a distressed baby on an airplane spreads distress throughout the cabin like wildfire. *Affective resonance* is what motivates humans to care about one another.

Affect Shame's purpose is to signal to us when something partially interrupts either of the two positive affects of Interest-Excitement or Enjoyment-Joy.

Because seeing and hearing distress in others, triggers my distress, I am motivated to ease their distress to ease my own. Attempts to do this may range from me comforting you to me yelling at you to '*stop your stupid crying and grow up*'. Both are an attempt to get you to stop displaying your distress so it can no longer trigger that same negative affect in me.

Let's consider shame in a different light for a moment

So what is the job of *affect Shame-Humiliation*? Put aside all of your preconceptions for a moment and remember that when we talk about affect, we are at the purely biological level of emotion.

Silvan Tomkins taught us that affect Shame-Humiliation (I'll just refer to it as *shame* from now on), was the last of the affect programs to evolve. Affect Shame's purpose is to signal to us when something partially interrupts either of the two positive affects of *Interest-Excitement* or *Enjoyment-Joy*. In other words, affect shame signals to us when something has gotten in the way of our ability to continue to be *interested* in, or to *enjoy* a moment. This affect (shame) then motivates us to look for the source of that impediment and then to do something about it. Why do we have an affect to do this job? Because Tomkins believed we humans are hardwired to:

1. Maximise positive affect
2. Minimise negative affect
3. Minimise the inhibition of affect
4. Maximise our ability to carry out 1-3

Anything that partially interrupts the first imperative of Tomkin's emotional blueprint must be noticed, and dealt with so we can return to positive affect. Signalling this interruption is the task of *affect Shame*.

Shame in a social situation

What do I mean by *partially interrupted positive affect*? Let me give an example that illustrates a social moment where *interest* and *enjoyment* has become impeded. Imagine yourself having coffee with a friend in a coffee shop. It's a nice morning, the coffee is good and so is the conversation. Which two affects are likely being triggered by this scene? You guessed it, the two positive

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affects of *Interest* and *Enjoyment*. I've shortened the names of these 2 affects to just their first words.

So what are you interested in? Well lots of things! You are interested in the conversation. You are interested in what your friend has to say, and you are interested in what you have to say to them. You are also interested in how interested they are in what you have to say! When you comment, you wait in anticipation to see their reaction and when they smile or laugh, you experience the enjoyment and then get interested in what they have to say next, or that thought that just popped into your head, that you want to share with them and on it goes.

Imagine now, that while you are mid-sentence, telling your friend something that you think is very interesting, they suddenly break eye contact and look away from you. There's a brief moment of 'oh' and then an uncomfortable feeling. This is *Affect Shame* telling you that something just got in the way of the *good feelings* you were just sharing with your friend.

After the nanosecond of *awfulness* triggered by your friend's sudden glance away, Donald Nathanson tells us that an inner search begins. Affect Shame is motivating you to seek out the source of the disruption to the good feelings (positive affects) that were going on just a moment earlier. This is called the *cognitive phase* of shame and it involves a brief inner search: "*Did I say something to offend my friend? Did I spit? Is my breath bad?*" In this fleeting moment there's also been physiological responses that have happened as part of the triggering of Affect Shame. Your eyes have likely looked down and away from your friend, probably only briefly. Your head may have slumped slightly as your neck muscles lost tone. A slight blush may have even stained your cheeks or neck, all physiological components of *Affect Shame*.

Shame signals a brief loss of connection with others

Affect Shame has signalled to you a momentary loss of connection with your friend and has begun recruiting your cognitive processes, including your memories, to search for what may have caused this partial impediment to the pleasant feelings from Affects *Interest* and *Enjoyment* that you were experiencing just a few seconds earlier.

Affect Shame did a very important job of signalling this brief impediment to positive affect and getting you to look within for what you may have done to cause it.

“What did I just say that may have upset my friend?”

Why does Affect Shame trigger this inner search? Tomkins said it happens so you can learn from this moment about how to avoid such a loss of positive affect in the future. So, what was it that caused your friend to look away, to disconnect? You want to know, but actually asking them *“Why did you look away while I was talking?”* seems difficult. It could seem rude. Although it’s possible that it might have been something you said that caused your friend discomfort, confirming this suspicion would surely bring even more shame to both of you. Instead of asking, you just keep talking as if nothing happened.

In this moment with your friend *Affect Shame* has firstly directed your attention the fact that your friend firstly looked away from you, and then has motivated you to *check yourself*, to search memory of past experiences like this, for possible causes of this disruption to positive affect - to analyse the brief interruption to what a moment earlier was a positive emotional connection with your friend.

You concluded from your analysis off the moment (the inner search) that it can’t have been anything you said or did. Perhaps your friend remembered something important they have to do as you were talking – which disrupted their own interest in you and pulled their attention away. Maybe they felt a jab of pain from an old knee injury? There’s every chance that their glance away had nothing to do with you, but Affect Shame did a very important job of signalling this brief impediment to positive affect and getting you to look within for what you may have done to cause it.

Within a second, of glancing away, your friend has looked back at you again and positive affects of Interest and Enjoyment return to replace the dreadful feeling of Affect Shame that had just briefly signalled the problem. This all happened very quickly.

Shame keeps us connected

What happened in those few fractions of a second is absolutely vital to our survival as a species. Tomkins taught us that “Shame affect exists to help us foster our sense of belonging and mastery by asking us to make sense of and overcome what might get in the way.” (Silvan Tomkins Institute Website, www.tomkins.org).

If we fail to stop and pay attention to what just got in the way of feeling good with others, our emotional connections to those we depend on are at risk. This is the reason that affect shame is thought of mainly as a *social affect*. It is mostly in the company of others that we experience the positive affects of *Interest* and *Enjoyment*, so it follows that most of the times these are impeded will be during our social interactions with others.

Shame is a powerful regulator of social behaviour. Every moment, we are making decisions about our behaviour with the goal of trying to feel good and to avoid the sting of Affect Shame. The mere thought of experiencing shame is punishing enough to make most of us think carefully about what we will do or say next. We want to avoid the awful thoughts and feelings that accompany a moment of shame, so we try to conduct ourselves in ways that will keep others *interested* in us and *enjoying* our company. Our *primitive brain* knows that our survival depends on our ability to sustain this *Interest* and *Enjoyment* in, and with others.

You would have concluded by now that there’s an infinite number of possible scenarios where our good feelings (Interest and Enjoyment) towards others and their good feelings (Interest and Enjoyment) towards us can be impeded and *Affect Shame* triggers to signal this. My coffee shop example is just one. In each possible instance, what makes the experience of *Affect Shame* so awful is a *sudden awareness of something about the self that we didn’t really want to know*. In the coffee shop, your friend’s sudden glance in another direction caused you to ask some important questions about the possible reasons for their apparent loss of interest in what you; “*Did I say something to offend? Did I spit? Is my breath bad?*” It’s awful to think that something you may have done or said (or not done or said), might have caused your friend hurt feelings. Shame makes us question ourselves and examine the possibility that we might not have been as interesting, clever,

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competent, charismatic, or even attractive as we would usually like to believe we are.

All of us are *extremely interested* in any information that affirms that we possess these desirable personal qualities, but as soon as any impediment, any disconnection with another is pointed out to us by affect shame, we are motivated to re-examine our view of ourselves and to search for what it was *about us* that might have just caused the problem.

Doing (or not doing) the business shame wants us to do

"I can see you feel rotten – that feeling you're getting is called shame and it has a really important job. It's telling you to do the brave work of owning up for what you did and to fix it. You might feel like running and hiding, pretending it didn't happen or blaming someone else for what happened. I feel like that when I muck up too!

What you're about to do will be hard, but when you do that brave fixing work, you, and everyone else will feel a lot better!"

Saying something like this can make all the difference for young people grappling with *Shame* after something goes wrong. When we are ashamed, all of us all feel hurt, diminished, exposed, vulnerable and even unloved.

Now that we know that shame's social purpose - *to firstly signal an interruption in our ability to be interested in, or enjoy other's company (or vice versa), and secondly, motivate us to examine possible reasons for that interruption*, the solution to the shame problem seems obvious. We simply need to do the self-scrutiny (like we did in that brief moment in the coffee shop), and if we conclude something we did caused the impediment to positive affect, we should take steps to deal with it and reconnect with the other person. It's that simple, okay? For most of us in most situations, it's not that simple. You've guessed that already haven't you. If most of us could do this very brave work with shame immediately, *"You looked away, are you okay? Did I say something wrong?"*, the world would be a far safer and gentler place to live.

The problem for us humans is that the self-scrutiny stage of the shame experience often triggers a second wave of shame, which adds to the discomfort. For us to *hang in there* with the moment

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of shame, and follow through with the self-reflection, and if necessary, social reconnection, we have to feel as though we are loved and accepted by others.

The problem is that in the moment of shame, we can feel so exposed, so utterly defective, that it is easy to forget that there is *anything good about us* - anything worthy of a sense of pride.

To do the *brave business* that shame asks of us, we need to be able to remind ourselves of the loving support of others. *"I am okay because there are other people who know that I am okay."* When we can remind ourselves of our loving attachments to others, we are more likely to regain our stable sense of self. We can accept that even though this moment of shame is awful, and something about us that isn't great might have been exposed, we can handle it and then do what we have to do to take care of whatever caused the impediment.

When Affect Shame strikes and we don't feel loved and accepted, we are completely helpless to do anything constructive with shame.

Only the *loved and connected* can do anything positive with shame

For people who have strong connections with others and the accompanying feeling of belonging, the initial emotional shock wave of shame passes. These individuals are able to remind themselves of other attributes that make up their self, and recognize that they are still worthwhile people and worthy of pride. Those familiar with Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) may refer to this as the ability to *'talk sense with one's self'* after a moment of shame.

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Teaching kids about shame

Over the last few years I have talked with hundreds of students about *affect shame* in a circle session called "*Dealing with feelings when things go wrong*". Young people very quickly relate to the Shame experience. There's much relief in just realising that we all have moments of feeling exposed, diminished, not good enough, guilty, disliked or unloved many times a day. In this session we talk about a particular, but common trigger of Shame - the realisation that we may have upset somebody or caused harm. When we talk about the job shame is trying to get us to do, young people understand from their own experience how hard it is to do the brave work of facing and fixing the problem we may have caused when we feel lonely, not good enough or socially disconnected. Students share what we all know - that Shame is a very isolating experience – we feel very lonely in that instant after discovering the problem and that we may have caused it.

As young people share with each other thoughts and feelings from their own moments of shame, they reflect that being able to admit that they've made a mistake and then doing the required *fixing* with others, is easier to do when they have relationships that make them feel worthwhile. When there's a friend nearby to say something like "*you've made a mess of this but you're still okay – now you gotta fix it!*", or to simply show that they still like them in spite of their indiscretion.

Incredible relief comes from facing up to our misdeeds and fixing things with those we may have upset, as long as we trust that this will make things better and restore us in the eyes of others.

When we have the feeling of being disliked, socially excluded (shorn from the herd) or even held in contempt by others, the prospect of facing up to the problem and admitting our mistakes to others is nearly impossible. There's just too much risk involved.

For young people in schools who are not experiencing stable and affirming connections with others, a moment of shame can be so painful, that to avoid the shame-pain, they use strategies that cover a broad range of behaviours that make up what Nathanson calls *The Compass of Shame*.

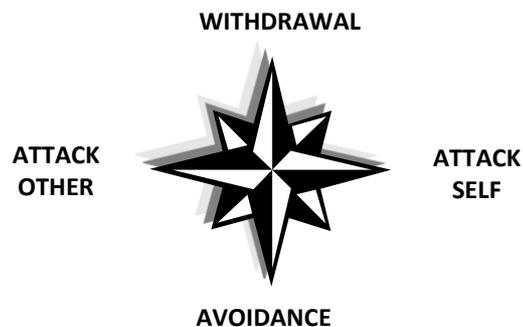
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The Compass of Shame

Nathanson's Compass of Shame is a model that describes four universal, but unhealthy sets of ways that people may react when an event (experience) triggers shame.

The important thing to reiterate about shame is that people with stable and affirming relationships are more able to handle a moment of shame honestly and authentically. They better equipped with the security from knowing they are loved and valued, to stay with their shameful feelings long enough to look bravely at what it was about their self, or their behaviour, that triggered the event that led to these feelings of shame. This is sometimes referred to as *'having a good hard look at ourselves'*, or *'the room of mirrors'*. Others call this *introspection*.

Behaviours from the compass of shame are all that we can do to try to defend our very fragile sense of self when we cannot handle the moment of shame in any positive way and do the work required of us. Let's look at these four sets of ways that we respond to shame when we are not feeling okay with ourselves.



Withdrawal

Put simply, at the Withdrawal pole of the compass are behaviours related to pulling ourselves away from contact with others. It is a self-protective response. When we use these behaviours we don't want to be seen by others and our actions aim to remove ourselves from what we believe to be the critical gaze of others.

I'm defective so I have to hide from others so they don't have any more reasons to dislike me. I just want to be somewhere nobody can see me – away from the eyes others where I won't feel any more shame. At school I might shut down when learning gets tough and just stop trying, if I'm little I might run

from the classroom and hide; I might deliberately be unprepared for classes, not complete work or hand work in to avoid risking failure. I might stop coming to school altogether. At the extreme end I will become isolated and recluse. In other words, I'm so defective, I'm out!

Attack Self

The Attack Self pole involves behaviours where people engage in mind-sets which manifest in accepting a diminished way of living around others that says *"I am lesser than you and you can treat me as a lesser person because I deserve it"*.

"As a defective person I have to be mean to myself and let others be mean to me so I can still have social contact with others. I don't believe I'm worth much as a person so I don't deserve the respect of others. At least if I allow people to take me for granted (even attack me), I'll still be socially connected, even if only in the role of the lesser person, the lower one. There are people who will enjoy attacking me and will allow me to stay around them as long as I permit their mistreatment of me. At school, I'll demean myself (I'm dumb / stupid / no good) and allow others to demean me. I might act in ways that invites scorn, even bullying from others. At the extreme end of attack-self I will self-harm.

Avoidance

The Avoidance pole of the compass of shame contains behaviours that are designed to call other's attention to attributes of the self that on the surface seem pride-worthy, and unashamed. Nathanson says that people at this pole try to cheat at the task of self-esteem by continually trying to draw attention to, how smart and competent, how attractive they are, how much they have or how strong they are. However, others quickly recognise these superficial appearances as unauthentic and fake. They are masking a deep sense of un-dealt-with personal shame. People at the avoidance pole may become caught up in the use of substances which alter the functioning of their Affect System and momentarily turn Affect Shame off.

The Attack Other pole contains behaviours that aim to cause harm to others in an attempt to make them feel just as bad (shameful), or worse, than we do.

I feel so ashamed that I have to act like I'm somebody else so nobody can see the real me. I might try to act tough - like I don't care, be silly or show off to try to make other people think I am different from whom I really am. I might brag about something I'm good at – because I think the real me is defective. I must keep directing others' attention to attributes of me that I'm believe are pride worthy and away from any perceived vulnerabilities. At school I might act the class clown or build my entire sense of self around a particular pursuit that brings me pride (to the detriment of everything else). I may engage in unsafe risk taking behaviours. Anything to project a proud and unashamed self to others.

Attack Other

The Attack Other pole contains behaviours that aim to cause harm to others in an attempt to make them feel just as bad (shameful), or worse, than we do. These attacks may range from mild, socially acceptable put downs, otherwise known as *banter*, right through to explosive and dangerous attacks. So called *coward punches* are an extreme form of *attack other*, and tell us much about the *shame pain* of the perpetrators. Attack other behaviour is the last and most desperate expression of a person who is helpless to deal with the information that affect shame is asking them to consider. Their undischarged shame has built up to levels where nothing else works to reduce the pain that comes with a sense of being worthless, unrecognised and unloved. Bullying and violent behaviour lives at this pole of the compass.

I feel so bad about myself that making someone else feel bad will help me feel better. If I can make somebody else feel worse than I do, maybe I'll feel a bit better about myself – a bit stronger. At school I will be the one who is quick to ridicule others, even perhaps teachers. I will never take responsibility for what goes wrong, I will always look for something or someone outside of me to blame for the problem because I lack the stable sense of self to look within. You will often find me in the company of somebody who is at attack-self in the compass because they willingly accept my taunts and insults. At the extreme end I may launch un-provoked physical attacks on those I believe to be weaker than me. They deserve to be attacked because they are weak. If a teacher challenges me about my behaviour, I will defend my fragile sense of self by

attacking back, or getting my revenge later on. I will win – because I have to win, the alternative is too awful to contemplate.

Helping kids recognise the emotions that course through all of us

You're now beginning to see the enormous potential for teaching young people about shame and even the other affects that make up their emotions. The literature agrees that humans do better when they can recognise and name the different feelings that course through them. Merely being able to say to oneself "*what I'm feeling right now is disappointment*" (part of the distress-anguish affect family), or "*this awful feeling is embarrassment*" (part of the shame affect family of emotions), engages the neocortex and gives a young person a much better chance of handling the difficult feeling in a way that doesn't make the situation worse for themselves or others.

When we teach in the affective domain, we develop in young people a way to better regulate their own emotions. When we teach them to name their feelings they do much better in all aspects of their lives. With enough practice, people eventually come to accept their feelings – own them, even the *tricky* negative ones. We can then start to think about what *this feeling* is trying to tell us and whether our response to *this feeling* is good for us. Of course, kids vary wildly in their ability to regulate their own emotions, but when we teach them about feelings, they stand a much better chance of making sense of them.

The list below is a summary of how each of the nine innate affects motivate us (what they want us to do). Although you probably won't teach your students about the affects, you can easily replace the terms below with thousands of other feeling words.

With enough practice, people eventually come to accept their feelings – own them, even the tricky negative ones. We can then start to think about what this feeling is trying to tell us and whether our response to this feeling is good for us.

Affect	Feeling terms	How it motivates us
Interest-Excitement	Fun, in the zone, tuned-in, engaged, switched on, focused, on task, astonished, bouncy, chipper...	Motivates us to engage, to learn more, and to master something.
Enjoyment-Joy	Contented, chilled, happy, fabulous, warm, joyous...	Motivates us to share a good experience with others – to affiliate. To post the good news on Facebook!
Surprise-Startle	Shocked, freaked...	Motivates us pay careful attention (stop, look, listen) to something around us that just changed quickly and might be dangerous.
Fear-Terror	Scared, frightened, jumpy, freaked out...	Motivates us to run or freeze to be safe.
Anger-Rage	Mad, Aggravated, cranky, grumpy, postal, narky, snitty...	Motivates us to act quickly to stop something happening that might harm us – we attack.
Distress-anguish	Stressed, Sad, cranky, nervy, grumpy, listless, rushed...	Motivates us to comfort ourselves or others.
Disgust	Disgusted, put off...	Motivates us to spit it out or get it (or them) away from us.
Dissmell	Wary, standoffish...	Motivates us to keep away from it, to avoid it (or them).
Shame-Humiliation	Confused, embarrassed, exposed, mortified, ashamed, guilty...	Motivates us to seek to restore – to reconnect socially. To make it right.

When kids learn to recognise this feeling of 'yuck' as shame, they can begin to appraise it as information that's telling them that some work needs doing to fix the problem.

Keeping Shame simple for kids

It has been said that shame is like *salt*. If you understand salt from a chemistry perspective, you already know that there are thousands of types of salts. Some salts you can put on your food, some salts go into sports drinks and some salts kill weeds in the garden and would kill us if we ingested them. Similarly, the range of experiences that can impede positive affect and trigger shame is endless, so the different ways we can experience shame is also endless.

When working with kids on shame, I narrow the experience down to *that awful feeling of 'yuk'* that we get when:

- We realise that we have upset someone (in other words, caused harm).
- We make a mistake that lets somebody down.
- We get into trouble for something.
- Something happens that shows us that we're not as clever, smart, nice or wonderful as we would like to think we are!

I have found that this explanation is sufficient because it covers such a wide range of possible social scenarios when shame would be triggered. We can all relate to these types of experiences and know how bad they feel when they first happen, and for the time following, until we do something about the problem.

When kids learn to recognise this feeling of 'yuck' as *shame*, they can begin to appraise it as information that's telling them that some work needs doing to *fix the problem*. This work might involve admitting fault (taking responsibility), making an apology to someone, repairing something, replacing something, showing kindness to someone, and the one we adults are all interested in – making a change in their behaviour to hopefully avoid a repeat of the situation.

Humans vary in their ability to do this last one, but under the right supportive conditions, all adults and children can all do some form of *fixing*. Schools who use Restorative Practices understand that the list of ways to fix a problem, even very serious problems is endless, but all involve efforts to try to restore a *something* or

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someone back to its former state, before the misdeed changed things.

Discharging Shame and Keeping off of the Compass

Many researchers have looked carefully at the shame experience and there seems to be agreement that unless shame is dealt with through actions that *restore* us in the eyes of others, and restore our own view of ourselves (fixing behaviours), the associated shame doesn't go away, or discharge. It stays with us and builds up. *Withdrawing* from social contact, *attacking self*, trying to *avoid* the problem or *attacking others* offers short term relief from shame but in the end, leads to more shame.

Research has shown that high levels of personal shame increase antisocial behaviour and violence. *Hurt people hurt people.*

When I work with kids on shame, the message is simple:

"The best way to deal with shame is to do the honest and brave work of fixing things.

There is however a 'but', and this 'but' is critical to young people understanding how we can create safe and happy learning communities.

But, we humans need to feel liked and accepted by others to have the strength to do this hard work. When we don't feel liked and accepted, we jump straight onto the Compass of Shame and try to make shame go away through quick and easy fixes – but this never works."

I then ask groups of kids:

"So, what does this tell us about how we should act towards others when they make a mistake, even if that mistake hurts someone?"

Kids know the answer straight away. They always tell me that the message here is that we need to be gentle with each other when things go wrong and harm is caused. They understand that when harm is caused to people by accident, or deliberate action, support needs to be given to all involved and the focus needs to be on accountability through admission, repair and reconnection. This is what affect shame is motivating us to do.

“If we get on their case, use revenge or completely unfriend them, they will never be able to do the fixing that they need to do – they’ll just pull away, hate themselves or hate everyone else and make it tougher for everyone. It won’t make anything better for the person they hurt in the first place either!”

This is very different to the righteous and viscous pile-on that is all too common nowadays (usually over social media platforms) where keyboard warriors ruthlessly attack and shame those who may have mis-stepped, mis-spoken or made a mistake. We’ve all done it because it a common and accepted part of our current culture.

During my time of teaching kids what they already intuitively know about shame I’ve heard young people share some truly startling insights. Many of which I wish I’d have written down straight away. One insight from an eleven-year-old girl was so amazing, I did record it the best I could. She was talking about how we can best react in a situation where somebody had caused harm to somebody by doing or saying something mean.

If we get on their case, use revenge or completely unfriend them, they will never be able to do the fixing that they need to do – they’ll just pull away, hate themselves or hate everyone else and make it tougher for everyone. It won’t make anything better for the person they hurt in the first place either!

This incredibly eloquent statement from student in a working class suburb of Adelaide encapsulated what decades of research have shown us. This level of insight from kids is far more common than you’d think. When talking safely and honestly with groups of young people about the shame experience, this sort of thing comes out often – *straight from the mouths of babes!*

When kids are taught to recognise Compass of Shame behaviours in themselves and each other they begin to cultivate more understanding and peaceful attitudes towards people and events that cause upset. Everyone seems to recover faster after.

Challenging the ‘cruel is cool’ culture

Imagine a classroom, or an entire cohort of kids where *attack other* behaviour is seen for what it really is – someone who is simply not coping with feelings of shame, and is lashing out at others in a frail attempt to feel better.

Imagine a classroom where young people respectfully confront harmful behaviour in *class restorative conferences* by asking questions of each other like “*what was happening for you to say such mean things? What is it that you’re struggling with so much?*”

Many people have the mistaken belief that shame is a toxic emotion and that we need to do whatever we can to ensure that young people never feel its sting. This is a misunderstanding.

*How can we help?" All of a sudden, cruel is no longer cool. Mean behaviour is immediately recognised by everybody as a *Compass of Shame* defence at the attack other pole.*

You may have been a part of creating this culture in schools. The experience of working with teachers and young people to cultivate this type of culture of understanding is truly inspiring. The life lessons that kids get from working in this culture cannot be underestimated. Learning is enhanced and outcomes improve across all indicators.

*"No one who feels calm, stable, competent, and centered ever needs to bully or abuse anyone. All behaviour at the Attack Other pole of the Compass of Shame reveals a human who is nearly helpless to deal authentically with shame. The taunts hurled by the bully tell you a lot more about the pain inside that individual than about the unfortunate recipient of this abuse." (Donald Nathanson: *Managing Shame Preventing Violence: A Call to our Teachers*)*

Shame has been misunderstood

Many people have the mistaken belief that shame is a toxic emotion and that we need to do whatever we can to ensure that young people never feel its sting. This is a misunderstanding.

Some confusion may stem from the difference between *shame* and *guilt* that many speak of. Within this way of looking at it, *shame* is defined as a sense of overall self-disgust about one's self as a wholly defective person, whereas *guilt* is a sense of disgust only in relation to something we did, not our whole self. Within this way of looking at shame and guilt, guilt becomes the far healthier option.

From my perspective, as a student of Tomkins' and Nathanson's work, how we support each other within communities to do what shame requires of us is the critical determinant as to whether moments of shame will motivate a reconnection or push people apart.

Regardless, whatever you call the feeling of *yuck* we humans get when an impediment to positive connection with others occurs, this inherently punishing emotion has evolved to motivate us to stop, take stock of the situation and to look for what may have just got in the way. It also asks us to do something about it.

When people don't understand Shame, they are more likely to go to extraordinary lengths to make it go away. These lengths are rarely helpful and often make things worse.

Shame is a family of emotions with the best of intentions, just like the other eight innate affects.

Conclusion

Why is it important to teach kids about shame? Because Shame is something we all have to deal with, literally hundreds of times a day. Our responses to Shame can be highly constructive, or hugely damaging to ourselves and those around us.

When we teach young people to recognise Shame and understand what it is asking them to do, they are better placed to learn from it and behave in ways that will keep them connected to those around them.

When people don't understand Shame, they are more likely to go to extraordinary lengths to make it go away. These lengths are rarely helpful and often make things worse.

When communities don't understand Shame and the importance of kindness, understanding and compassion in helping its members deal with the many faces of shame, its most vulnerable members will never be able to handle personal shame in helpful ways. Without the loving support of others, they will be condemned to Compass of Shame behaviours that in the long run damage the bonds that hold all of us together.

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