

The Psychological Effects of Shaming Children

Unintentional shaming scenarios:

Here are a few scenarios where shame can unknowingly find its way into your parent–child relationship, according to [Anastasia Moloney](#), an early childhood development specialist and an expert at [The Tot](#)—and perhaps even more important, how you can say no to shaming opportunities.

1. Not Letting a Child Do Things For Themselves

Moloney says, “Children hit a stage where they want to be independent in their daily skills or decision making. Sometimes these choices are not what you had in mind or their independence slows your routine and it is just easier to do things and make the decisions for them.”

He [or] she needs to learn through experience and build confidence in independence.

Moloney shares a scenario all parents can easily imagine: “You are trying to get everyone ready and out the door, your child wants to put on their clothes themselves but puts it on backward or in your opinion takes too long so you take over and hurry them.”

You jump in, chiding their slowness, fixing their mistakes, and generally making them feel *less than* through your actions, words, and tone. That’s shaming.

But it can be fixed! Moloney says, “No matter how time consuming it may seem, letting your child try to dress him- [or] herself, play their own way, or make age-appropriate choices for themselves is beneficial. He [or] she needs to learn through experience and build confidence in independence.”

2. Judging Your Child's Choice

“This can be as simple as a critical statement in response to an action, such as ‘What were you thinking?’ or ‘I can’t believe you just did that,’” says Moloney.

Instead, she encourages parents to “acknowledge [the child’s] choice and offer to share with them why it may not be a good idea. If possible let them learn from experience and then talk about why that might not be the right choice after.”

3. Telling Them Not to Cry

Avoid this phrase at all costs! “Instead of telling them not to cry,” Moloney says, “try getting on their level, then relate to them and acknowledge what they are feeling.”

Think about consequences being very relevant. If I throw blocks, I need to take a short break from blocks and can come back when I am calm.

In truth, isn’t that what we all want when our tears are ready to burst?

4. Setting Expectations Too High

Expectations are wonderful. Often, they’ll help little ones rise to the occasion, learn new skills, and eventually become proficient adults.

This does not mean that you cannot discipline or enforce rules, just make sure you do so appropriately.

Still, Moloney reminds parents: “Set your expectations at an age-appropriate level. Your 2- and 3-year-old has trouble with limits and sharing. Give them age-appropriate behavior expectations. Think about consequences being very relevant. If I throw blocks, I need to take a short break from blocks and can come back when I am calm.”

5. Time Out or Public Discipline

Appropriate discipline will always be a controversial discussion among parents, but Moloney says that “If your child is misbehaving with other kids around, you shame your child when you yell across the playground to tell them to stop or point out what they are doing. Instead of sending your child to time out or disciplining him [or] her in front of everyone, take your child aside and talk to them about the situation or the rules.

“This also will give your child a break from the situation, allow him [or] her to calm down, and then you can address the issue in a learning setting. This does not mean that you cannot discipline or enforce rules, just make sure you do so appropriately.”

I force myself to pause and imagine what I want to say and the feelings I want to communicate *before* I apply any type of discipline. I’m not perfect, but that initial pause gives me the time I need to reflect and avoid unknowingly (or knowingly) shaming my child.

6. Using a Harsh Tone or Laughing at Your Child

Moloney hit the nail on the head when she said that “We want our children to improve and learn from their situations. You can be firm but respectful with our children.”

...instead of ignoring their statement or telling them you do not understand, try to figure out the context or repeat what you do understand.

Repeat with me now: TONE IS EVERYTHING.

7. Telling them they are Not a Big Boy or Girl

“This often occurs with potty training,” says Moloney, “and with habits you think they ‘should have’ outgrown such as thumb sucking, sleeping in their own bed, etc. These are all big milestones for your child and we need to be supportive.”

Moloney says, “Encouragement with new milestones, even when we feel frustrated or your child experiences regressions [is key]. This can also be when not understanding your

child when they are first learning to communicate, instead of ignoring their statement or telling them you do not understand, try to figure out the context or repeat what you do understand. This can encourage them to continue to communicate effectively.”

Another reason we should all kick shaming to the curb? Science says a gentler approach is good for our kids...and good for parents too!

The gentle parenting community is brimming with advice, hands-on tips, and resources to reform how parents approach discipline and cultivate an atmosphere of respect for our children.

That’s exactly the case when a parent identifies shame in their interactions with their child. They recognize what has been a behind-the-scenes player in their parenting techniques and can commit to breaking the cycle of shaming their child.

When all is said and done, Moloney encourages parents to “take many deep breaths to make sure you handle the moment in a positive way and create a teaching moment where you can help your child grow.”

That doesn’t come easily, but with practice, it’s something we can all improve on.

Parenting is a balance of creating boundaries (in my case, setting a precedent of making healthy food choices) and opportunities for independence (allowing my son to have a reasonable amount of control by letting him choose if he wants a PB&J, grilled cheese, or turkey sandwich, for example).

Once parents identify their shaming triggers, we have to make it a goal to eliminate them. The result will be a happier, healthier family experience where trust abounds.

You’ll breathe a sigh of relief at the calm and personal achievement you’ve reached, and although your child might not recognize the efforts you’ve gone to in reducing episodes of shaming, they’ll definitely feel the effects and be better off because of it.

In many children, their feelings are magnified well beyond the proportions of us adults, who have perspective of more years. Shame, in particular, is felt keenly by any human, and so its magnification can be exponential in children and teens. The sheer weight of these feelings can be too heavy, too unrelenting. A child or a teen doesn't understand that these feelings will get easier and even end at some point.

Shaming also runs the risk of being far out of proportion with the behavior you're trying to stop, and that's because [embarrassment](#) is largely defined by the individual. It's impossible to externally control it.

So what are some options for [discipline](#) that parents can use instead of shame?

- Allow the natural consequences of their actions to manifest, instead of the contrived consequences that occur through shaming. Often, a parent doesn't even need to do anything, just monitor the situation and help your child understand how the unpleasant things that are happening are connected to their actions.
- Positive reinforcement of the behaviours you DO want to see. It's hard in the heat of the moment for a parent to stop and focus on other behaviours, especially when it seems there's a problem. However, being able to reinforce those positive behaviours later that day or the next WILL have an effect and will pay dividends in the future.
- That said, parents should not [neglect](#) to enforce limits consistently. If your child broke a rule, a negative consequence that is immediate, specific and within the context of the problem is appropriate to undertake. Take care not to overreact out of frustration.
- Act like a coach. It can be hard with teens, but if you take them aside and privately explain that some of their behaviors are concerning, being very specific, you may be able to rock them back on their heels and make them think about how to behave differently next time. Doing this in private is important, because your teen needs to be able to hear and consider your words without the [fear](#) of "losing face" with their peers, which is another reason why public shaming can backfire badly.
- Revisit your priorities, and potentially disengage from behaviours that are out of your control. Take a step back and consider whether the behaviour you're worried about is really that worrisome. Now, do not get us wrong, there are plenty of teen behaviors that are – and should be – concerning to parents. But there are also many stupid things that teens do simply because they are teens and they are still learning their way through life. Recognize that teens are establishing their independence from parents and family which is a perfectly normal and healthy process. While teens may miss the mark at times, allow them increased independence where you can to help satiate that normal and natural yearning.
- Insist on apologies and restitution, when appropriate. If your teen's behaviour causes harm or inconvenience to another, then a follow-up apology and restitution should always be implemented. Saying sorry, making it right, forfeiting allowance

to repair or replace something, all of these forms of restitution are natural consequences, as well, and can reinforce that this behavior should not be repeated.

The harmful effects of shaming can be long-lasting, but it's always a parent's instinct to want to stop or reverse their child or teen's bad behaviours. Fortunately, those instincts can be fulfilled in other ways while still allowing the teen to slowly increase independence. Those tactics should be seen as long-term [parenting](#) investments, and thus may take a bit more time to take effect, but that doesn't mean they aren't as potent as a public shaming. The benefit is that they don't carry with them the harmful effects that shaming often has, and the positive aspects will last long into the future.