



GUILT & SHAME

When we are little we start to explore the world around us without an understanding of danger. Adults sometimes need to intervene to keep us safe and help us learn.

Young children like to explore the world around them but they don't realise the risks of, for example, pulling the dog's tail, climbing too high, crossing the road. It is the adult's job – a parent, a teacher – to keep the child safe. The adult has to stop them, gently and firmly saying 'No, you can't do that, it's not safe.' The young child doesn't realise that the adult is saying 'no' to behaviour; they experience the 'no' as being told they are a bad kid. This creates a feeling of shame, not a nice feeling. The adult has, by saying 'no', temporarily broken the relationship. When the adult sees the child is upset they can offer comfort and then explain why the behaviour is dangerous. Also show them the safe behaviour, for example, patting the dog, where they can climb or holding hands to cross the road. The adult repairs the relationship showing the child that the behaviour is not OK, but the child is still loved. This process helps teach children what is and is not safe and acceptable behaviour; as well as that relationships can be repaired.

This sort of parenting, when reasonably consistent, leads to a child feeling guilt rather than shame. "Oops, I shouldn't have done that, how can I fix it?"

Problems can arise when, in a situation where the adult needs to boundary the child to keep them safe but the adult does not offer comfort nor explanation as to why the behaviour isn't safe. In other words, the adult tells the child off and does not repair the relationship. In this situation the child can be left with their shame without anyone to help them with it. Children can then start to believe that it is them, not their behaviour that is bad. Over time this can lead to toxic shame – the child feels worthless, unlovable or bad. The shame feels very threatening and often children develop a shield of shame to cope with this. They minimise, deny, rage and blame others to try and avoid this feeling.

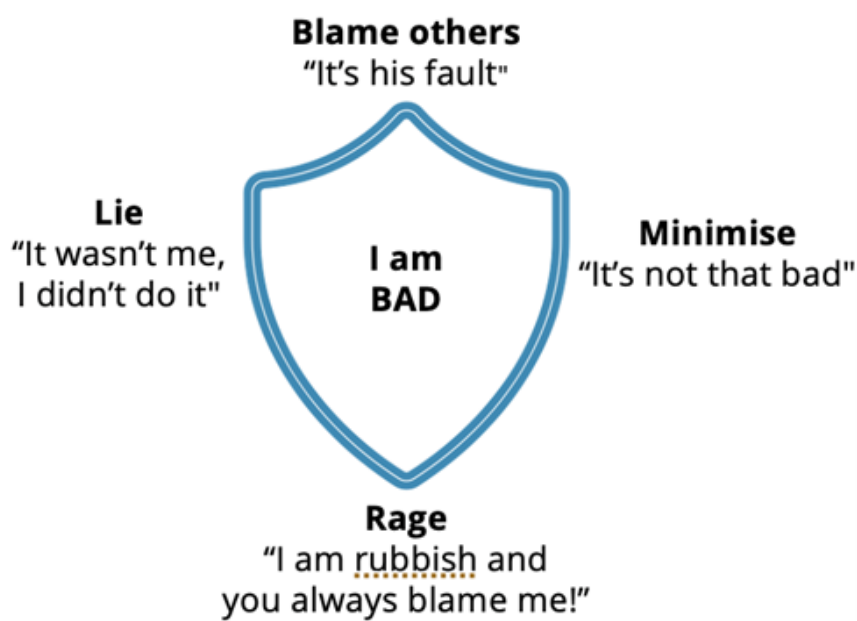


IMAGE BY GOLDING, K. S. (2008). NURTURING ATTACHMENTS: SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHO ARE FOSTERED OR ADOPTED. LONDON: JESSICA KINGSLEY



When adults help the child by being there for them and repairing the relationship this enables the child to manage shame and then to experience guilt. Guilt is a helpful emotion that enables children to reflect on their actions, learn safe and social behaviors and repair relationships.

Watch Daniel Hughes on Shame Here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gkASbYS0vc>