

## Guilt versus Shame



It is important that parents instill in their child the capacity to feel guilt. **Guilt** is a good thing – it tells us that there was something about our behavior that was wrong or inappropriate. The child learns that while they might be fundamentally ‘good,’ their behavior was ‘bad,’ since it might have been disrespectful, inconsiderate, or hurtful to others. And since guilt does not feel very good, we learn to avoid engaging in those kinds of behaviors in the future. In sum, good parents, acting on the behalf of the larger culture or society, must develop in their child the capacity for guilt. Combined with

empathy, it allows us to be morally responsible individuals. **Shame** is something much more severe and is even poisonous to the mind of a child. Shame is not just feeling bad about one’s behavior, but feeling bad about *who one is as a person*. Guilt says: “*my behavior was bad*,” while shame says: “*I am bad*.” This sense of shame can often develop when parents are overly critical of their children and frequently use anger or physical forms of punishment. While guilt can be tolerated, shame is very painful and the emotional component is often repressed or avoided at all costs. Children who carry a lot of shame may be overly anxious or preoccupied with how others perceive them – making it difficult to admit personal faults. They may also have a very difficult time taking responsibility for their actions, instead passing the ‘blame’ onto someone else or some aspect of the situation.

How to prevent your child from developing feelings of shame:

- Avoid yelling at your child or getting excessively angry. Long lectures and heavy ‘guilt trips’ also tend to be ineffective and may encourage the internalization of shame. In general, try to use behavioral consequences and a calm yet firm ‘neutral tone’ to get your point across.
- When disciplining your child, try to use wording that makes it clear that you are disappointed with their behavior, not them. After things settle, and some time passes, try to re-engage your child to allow them to feel good about a more positive experience.
- Spend time with your child and allow them to see all the good things *you* see in them.
- Talk to your child and ask them about how they are feeling. Oftentimes poor behavior can be the result of a child impulsively acting on a feeling – by helping them talk about their feelings, you will make it more likely they will know them, and will *think* before acting. It will also help them talk about negative feelings (such as guilt and shame), should they ever need to be talked about.