

# **For Shame, For Shame: How to End Shaming When Disciplining**

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Have you ever felt as though you were being watched? If you have ever been around children, then you have been more closely than you think. Children, particularly young children, imitate actions, words, voice intonations and even attitudes. Sure, some of it is cute, especially when they imitate positive actions. However, some of what children imitate can be harmful to them.

Parents have an enormous amount of influence over their children. It is my experience that parents often underestimate the magnitude of their power and influence. I have heard many parents say “he does not listen to me,” or “he does not pay attention.” Even if you think they are not listening, they are, and they are watching. Their little minds are taking copious notes.

Children absorb subtle cues from their parents. They tend to see the world through their parents’ eyes. If the parents are fearful, depressed, anxious, or angry, their children have a greater tendency to be fearful, depressed, anxious, or angry. Conversely, if the parents are relaxed, peaceful, and happy, their children are more likely to be relaxed, peaceful, and happy.

Another subtle cue influences how children see themselves. Children see themselves, in part, the way in which the parents see themselves. For example, research indicates that adolescent girls suffering from an eating disorder are more likely to have a mother who also has an eating disorder. Similarly, parents who have low self-esteem, or a poor self image are more likely to have children with low self-esteem, or poor self-image. Additionally, the parents’ treatment of the children influences how the children view themselves. If parents are demeaning, shaming, uninvolved, or detached, then children are more likely to see themselves in a negative way. Concepts, thoughts, attitudes and actions can be passed from generation to generation without the parents or children’s awareness.

The parents’ behavior is sometimes more about them than it is about the child. For example, the shaming parents do often grows out of the shame they feel. Without intending to, parents sometimes shame their children. The shaming can be as subtle as a roll of the eyes, click of the tongue, sigh, or demeaning humor. Shaming can also take the form of yelling, threatening, or embarrassing in front of others. More overtly, parents can shame their children by name-calling, making comments such as “I have told you a hundred times;” or “are you that stupid;” or by being physically abusive. When the parents’ shame is projected onto the children, the children are left to shoulder the weight of the shame. Their shoulders are too small and weak, so they often end up internalizing the shame. This predisposes the child to developing depression, anxiety and relational difficulties in adulthood.

One facet of parenting especially vulnerable to shaming is the area of discipline. Sometimes parents can over react. Parents need to realize and remember that when a child disobeys, especially a young child, it is not a personal attack. The child is not seeking revenge. The disobedience needs to be addressed because in truth the child is in disobedience to God. The parents' role is to help the child return to a right relationship with God. Parents are never given the right to be harsh, demeaning, or abusive.

One well-known parenting book says that if a child rebels publicly, the parent has the right to punish publicly. To this advice, I totally disagree. First, discipline is not about punishing, nor about getting even. Discipline is about correcting and teaching appropriate behavior. Secondly, the rule "praise in public, reprimand in private," is important to remember. When parents shame their children in public by yelling, name-calling, and even spanking, the parent-child relationship is broken down more than the behavior is corrected. Although, not intended, the parents' own embarrassment, disappointment and shame are projected onto the child.

The parent-child relationship helps to mold behavior and shape the child's view of himself. There is a part of every child that desires to please and wants their parents' approval. Children have a need to belong to something bigger than them. A positive parent-child relationship helps to meet those needs and desires.

Parents can end the cycle of shaming. It begins by being aware of their shame and of their shaming behavior. If you believe you have shamed your child, there is hope. I suggest going to that child and apologizing for your misbehavior. Then take the next step, and ask for the child's forgiveness. Children want to have positive relationships. If shaming your child has become a pattern, pray and ask God to help you become aware of your tendency, and ask God to help you change your responses. If shaming your child has become routine, or is abusive, whether verbally or physically seek professional help. A qualified therapist can help you get to the root of the shame and help you to change your pattern of interacting with your child. You do have a choice, and you can begin a new, healthier way of disciplining and interacting with your child.

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