

Managing Toxic Shame - The Four R's

RELATIONSHIP > RUPTURE > REPAIR > RELATIONSHIP

Shame is a development stage experienced by all toddlers. It is the ugly feeling a child experiences when corrected or disciplined by a parent or care giver. Securely attached children move relatively quickly through this stage and move on to develop healthy guilt, compassion, empathy and a conscience. This process is facilitated by the parent/care giver who regularly repairs any relationship fracture. This enables the child to differentiate between themselves and their behaviour. They begin to internalise the knowledge that the relationship with parent is intact and unconditional. Their internal working model is positive, they believe they are good, loveable, worthy and safe. Children with a history of trauma and neglect have a limited experience of relationship repairs and sadly, some have none! Many have been punished and shunned and are therefore stuck in relationship rupture with their primary attachment figure.

This constant state of relationship rupture produces toxic shame within the child. They view themselves as bad, disgusting, unloveable and dangerous! The feeling of self disgust is overwhelming, all encompassing and often soul destroying. This unmet developmental need will remain unmet without regular relationship repair. This can be extremely difficult for many parents and carers as behaviours exhibited by children with developmental trauma, are often contrary to their own moral code. Stealing, lying, swearing, violence, control and defiance to name a few. Understandably, parents and carers will struggle to access empathy when such behaviours are often extreme and at times relentless.

Therapeutic parenting enables parents and carers to depersonalise these behaviours and recognise them as a mode of communication. An awareness of the underlying emotion and unmet needs become the focus of the therapeutic parent which enables them to remain empathic and connected.

The open and engaged parent can then offer genuine relationship repair as they consciously respond to this unmet developmental need opposed to emotionally reacting to the presenting behaviours.

It is important that the therapeutic parent is continually aware of their own internal triggers as this awareness will dilute the intensity of an emotional

reaction in the moment. Effective therapeutic parenting begins with the parent/carers own ability to self regulate. An internal dialogue within the parent enables him/her to evaluate, reflect, depersonalise and connect even when faced with extremely challenging situations.

Standard parenting leans towards issuing a consequence for the behaviour prior to the relationship repair. This is managed well by the securely attached child as they have internalised their primary attachment figure and are certain of relationship constancy. This, however is not the case for children and young people who have experienced ruptured attachments and little if any relationship repair.

The therapeutic parent repairs the rupture immediately, letting the child know that they are safe, loved, cared for and remaining with them (not going to live with another parent or carer), prior to implementing a consequence. This process cannot effectively be carried out if the parent is dysregulated but must take place as soon as the parent/carer feels calm again otherwise the relationship remains in rupture and the child's toxic shame increases. This can quickly escalate into a further deterioration of behaviour and affirm the child's negative internal working model.

Consequences need to be natural and logical and as a result of a choice the child has made. Taking things away from a child who has already lost everything is pointless and again gives the message of being undeserving thus resulting in further shame and confirming the child's negative internal working model. Taking an iPad away from a child who has kicked the dog does not link cause and effect thinking in the child's brain and will never alter the behaviour! Asking or insisting that our children say sorry arises from our own need to hear the word and move on from our own uncomfortable feelings. The child doesn't actually 'feel' sorry and will often comply only to end the conflict and access the next thing they want. In order to rewire the brain and again link cause and effect, we need to encourage them to 'show' sorry. This can be an act of service for the person they've upset, hurt or offended. This could be making a drink for someone, rubbing cream into an arm etc. If they've hurt you, washing up, sweeping leaves etc. In order to build the bonds of attachment, it is beneficial if the child does something 'with' the parent/carer and is thanked afterwards. Writing letters or cards is not advised as the child will often sit in a pool of shame whilst writing them or simply just lie to get it out of the way.

Think of a time you have upset someone and that awful feeling you have until you put things right. The sense of relief is enormous. Imagine having that

feeling of shame ALL of the time! When children are offered an opportunity to repair by showing sorry, the toxic shame begins to reduce and this particular incident is less likely to be added to their never-ending list of reasons that they're bad, unloveable and unworthy. Dismantling shame takes a long time but can be the key to placement stability and hope for the child's future where the need to prove they are bad is greatly reduced and sometimes even removed.

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