

# Foster & Adopted Teens *On* the Role of Shame



Often times parents will hear over and over again, “He’s just being defiant” and you need to give him more consequences to stop these behaviors. But that doesn’t look at the whole picture and what the true cause of their behaviors might be.

Shame is often the hidden factor for most defiance/acting out in adoptive and foster teens.

## ACTING OUT TEENS = SHAMEFUL TEENS WHAT IS SHAME?

In the profound words of Dr. Brene Brown, “Shame is that feeling in the pit of your stomach that tells you how horrible you are and makes you want to hide from the world.” Shame tells us that “I am bad” not “I did something bad.”

“I did something bad” is guilt. Guilt is a motivating feeling and actually healthy. It makes us want to DO something like apologize or figure out a better way to alleviate our bad feeling.

Both shame and guilt are experiences created through relationships but shame unlike guilt, leads to feelings of loss and rejection, not motivation. Humans need connection and belonging. Shame tells us we are flawed. We, as humans, are desperately afraid that if that flaw is exposed or revealed, we will lose our connections and worthiness of acceptance. Thus, at shame’s core is the fear of disconnection.

Foster and adopted youth have had life events which involved significant loss of connection and rejection. Due to that and the egocentrism of children, these events quickly become shame. Often times foster and adopted youth were so young at the times of these events, the memories and corresponding messages they learned about themselves, often shame, are stored in their brain in a way that does not involve language or very basic language. This is

important because memories encoded without or minimal language are much less responsive to language (talking) later in life.

Even more significant is shame's effect on the brain. First, we need to discuss the prefrontal cortex of adolescents and the amygdala. The prefrontal cortex, the area behind our forehead, is responsible for reasoning, rational thought and logic. In teens, their prefrontal cortex is not fully developed and won't finish development until roughly 25. Furthermore, research has shown that early complex trauma and/or developmental trauma inhibits the growth of the brain pathway, "highway," that connects the prefrontal cortex to the amygdala.

The amygdala is a small part of our "reptilian brain," which is responsible for strong emotions. Events that evoke shame trigger a reaction in the amygdala. These strong shame emotions often then illicit the body's survival response system — fight, flight or freeze. So to put it all together, an adopted teen is triggered by an event which evokes their shame, which then activates their amygdala and survival response, but because of their developmental trauma history they have a small, not well paved highway that connects their emotions to the underdeveloped part that's supposed to control said emotional reaction.

So if you're wondering why your foster or adopted children act out as if they had almost no control over it, this is why. They actually don't have much control and it's our job to help them regain that control.

Our first step in helping teens regain that control is through understanding what it feels like and then how to identify someone experiencing shame.

### SO, WHAT DOES SHAME FEEL LIKE?

In Dr. Brene Brown's research, she asked people, what does Shame feel like? These

were some of the answers:

- "Shame is being exposed, the flawed parts of yourself that you want to hide from everyone revealed. You want to hide or die."
- "Shame is hating yourself and understanding why other people hate you too."

### "SHAME IS BEING REJECTED"

The negative beliefs adopted and foster teens usually express are:

- I am unlovable

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- I am worthless
- I am a bad person
- I am a failure
- I deserve bad things
- It's my fault. I'm responsible for what happened to me or others.

### WHAT DOES SHAME LOOK LIKE?

Teens experiencing shame will show it in many ways but the key feature is an attempt to disconnect or hide from you or others.

Shame significantly decreases verbal ability and they may verbally attack you. The more hurtful the comment, the greater the magnitude of how bad they feel. It often sounds like, "I don't care" or negative predictions such as "it won't work" or "they won't like me." They will continue to try to emotionally disconnect. To parents and professionals, it often feels like a wall, such as the child will change the subject or deny there is a problem.

A few behavior cues include; lack of eye contact (look down and away), physically trying to make themselves smaller: curling into a ball, hiding, shouting and possibly coming after someone physically.

### HEALING SHAME - EMPATHY = ANECDOTE

So now that you can identify shame and a little bit of how it feels, we can use that knowledge to heal the shame through empathy. Empathy is giving someone the experience of having been fully understood, validated and cared for. It's a skill like active listening that can be learned and improved greatly with practice.

Lets imagine a 14-year-old boy has just lost his dog, his fur-best friend, to cancer.

To start, try to imagine a similar situation you've been through. Have you lost a pet or a family member who meant a lot to you? If you haven't had a loss, have you read a story about someone's experience with loss? Tap into your feelings and thoughts around that experience.

### EMPATHY HAS 4 ELEMENTS:

1. See the world through their eyes and experiences. Remember they didn't grow up with Lassie and have always had the Internet. Try to imagine their world of tweets and snaps.
2. Accept them, including their feelings and perspectives without judgment.
  - a. Teen says, "I just feel like no one will ever love me like he did."
  - b. Accepting response, "Would you tell me more about what you're thinking?"
  - c. NOT accepting responses, "No, you're great. You are so lovable. You'll get another dog who will love you just as much."
  - d. It doesn't fit with their feelings, beliefs or image, it clashes and they won't hear it nor feel supported. Instead go into that dark place with them, but careful not to agree and just hear them out.

3. Understand and validate their feelings  
— Ask questions or offer feeling words if they can't find them. "It sounds like you might be feeling really alone and sad right now, is that right?" No one is wrong in their feelings. It might not be how you'd feel, but that doesn't make their feelings wrong.
4. Communicate #1, #2, #3 both verbally and non-verbally. They will hear your tone, eye contact and body language.

**Common Pitfalls:** Block empathy and protect us from feeling their pain.

- "Even Worse." At least it was just your dog and not your mom.
- "Look on the Bright Side." At least you don't have to wake up early to walk him anymore
- Problem Solving. How can I fix this? Lets go buy another dog.

The key to healing shame through empathy is experience. You are giving them experiences that combat the same. Experience with people created the shame, only experiences of empathy in relationship will truly heal the shame.

But healing takes time. So here are some other strategies to help with teens experiencing shame.

#### PARENTING APPROACH – USING NURTURE

Nurture is caring and providing for their growth.

- First, forget whatever you thought you were going to get done. This must come first. Offer them something physically comforting, such as chocolate milk, favorite stuffed animal or another comfort item.
- Be ready. They will throw up a lot of protectors to keep you from seeing their ugliness.
- Be patient with verbal stuff. Help them out, wonder out loud, draw a picture, have a stuffed animal do the talking for them.
- Offer options for repair. Do something together.
- You must remain present, convey "I get it, we can figure this out together, I'm not going to leave you."
- Sometimes no words are needed.

- Manage your own emotions: their behaviors can be difficult, you must remain regulated yourself.
- Know that if at times you feel like a bad parent because you feel like you can't help your kid, that's OK too. Sometimes it's a hard battle. ☼

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Leanne Hershkovitz, MA/Ed.S, LPC, has been working in the field of trauma and adoption for five years. She specializes in attachment-based therapy and recently received her training in EMDR. Hershkovitz is passionate about helping adolescents to create loving, affectionate relationships, develop emotional regulation skills, heal traumas and increase overall functioning. Hershkovitz has a small private practice for counseling in Springfield, New Jersey and is an adjunct professor at Caldwell University. Hershkovitz also has a therapy dog, Harley, a 25-pound hypoallergenic cockapoo, who attends all her sessions. And she isn't afraid to admit, the best therapist with fur and four paws.

## ( kids in waiting )



*Imunique, 18*, is a friendly, loyal, brave and outgoing young lady. She is described as thoughtful and creative and enjoys hanging out with her friends. A talented singer and dancer, she also enjoys acting. Imunique likes to go to church, playing board games and hiking. Her favorite food is pizza. In eighth grade, she receives tutoring services and dislikes homework, but enjoys school, especially language. Imunique plans to attend college and pursue cosmetology. She is motivated to be successful.

Imunique says she feels ready for adoption and is open to a family with animals who will allow her continued contact with her siblings. She is looking forward to finding her forever home. She would do well with either older or younger children. A two-parent family that can be firm and structured yet loving and patient is being sought. Imunique just wants to be loved by a family. To learn more about Imunique, visit [childrenawaitingparents.org](http://childrenawaitingparents.org) or call 585-232-5110. (Child ID #2202)

