

How to Help Kids with Shame



by EDWARD T. WELCH

It was finally the day of the Halloween parade at school, and one little third-grade girl was beyond excited. She left for school wearing her Elsa costume, wig, and makeup. What could be better than to be dressed as Elsa *all day*? She was dropped off to school a bit late, so she didn't notice that those she passed were all in their everyday clothes. When she burst into the classroom, her costume was perfect. But the class *brought* their costumes rather than wore them. Mercifully, her teacher sent her to the nurse's office until her mom could come for her. She begged her mom to not go back to school that day. Shame wants to hide.

Another snapshot. A twelve-year-old boy would not respond to his name. Neighbors assumed that he was belligerent and aloof until they met a family member who mentioned that the name he responded to was "Good-for-nothing." With such a name, expect other abuses in this boy's life, such as neglect, anger, and violence. He endured all of these—and so he experienced shame. He felt worthless because others have treated him as if he is.

These are only two ways that shame can be apparent in children or teens. This article will describe shame and bring selected biblical passages to

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that experience. My goal is to know our children better and find a way into Scripture that can make it lively and meaningful to them. Using the story of a boy named Steven, I will approach shame first from the perspective of a counselor or helper, and then I will offer suggestions for parents.

What Is Shame?

Shame is the experience of being unacceptable, less than others, and different. When children are with familiar people they feel it less, but when they are in public and feel seen, it can rage. Shame is being *seen* and unacceptable.

Shame can include guilt, which is the imprint that we have done wrong before God and other people, but, at least with children and teens, shame is less often traced back to a particular wrong. If it is, confession of sin can quickly put it to rest. Shame is usually more complicated. It is more often

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a result of being treated badly or simply believing that we lack something and don't fit in.

Shame is easy to miss. You can know a person a long time and not know shame is right under the surface. It prefers to hide. The reality is that shame is a dominant feature of our human experience no matter what age we are, and it is a dominant theme in Scripture. Step one is to see it.

Words for shame. Shame has a diverse vocabulary, and knowing some of the many words that describe it can help us to see it more clearly. Here are a few.

Inferior	Weak
Inadequate	Rejected
Loser	Nothing
Different	Ignored
Failure	Bullied

Misfit	Unattractive
Stupid	Unpopular
Embarrassed	Unwanted
Stared at	Last

These experiences are usually incited or aggravated by mistreatment, but they can also come attached to our humanity and appear even under the best of conditions. They remind us that we fall short, don't quite fit in, and are not yet at home.

Unprovoked shame. Some children feel secure in their world. They are not preoccupied with the possible opinions of others. They seem to enjoy being around people, and they enter quickly into new relationships. Here you find the born entertainers. But many children are especially self-conscious, and this experience does not have to be linked to the harmful actions or words of others. They feel *insecure* and at sea when separated from a safe person or a safe place. Parents might describe them as *shy*, *anxious*, *introverted*, or *easily embarrassed*. Life might feel like a series of standards imposed by school, church, the community, parents, siblings, or friends, and all these are opportunities for failure. As counselors and parents, we recognize that these struggles don't simply disappear over time, though they might be pushed into the background as a child matures.

Provoked shame. Shame also has its reasons. It is a response to the sinful words or actions of other people. These experiences of shame can have more enduring consequences. Growing and maturing does not push them very far into the background.

This shame can be provoked by *neglect* and *rejection*—what others *do not* do more than what they do. Another person is favored. Other matters are more important than you. Perhaps neglect and rejection were a one-time event. More often they were an enduring experience in everyday life.

Victimization is more intentional than rejection and neglect. This shame is a response to the oppressive sins of other people. Children and teens have been treated as objects—like nothing—and they believe they are nothing. This victimization can include childhood traumas such as sexual violations, physical violence, and persistently cruel words.

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