

Do You Shame Your Child?

Guest post by Laura Markham.

“Children learn to regulate their behaviors by developing an emotional ‘clutch,’ located in the prefrontal cortex, that can turn the accelerator off when the brakes are applied and redirect their interest in more acceptable directions....An activated accelerator followed by the application of brakes leads to a nervous system response with a turning away of eye gaze, a feeling of heaviness in the chest, and a sinking feeling...This limit-setting ‘no-induced’ form of shame is healthy...different from toxic shame...(where) the child feels disconnected from us, misunderstood...‘bad’...” - Dan Siegel and Mary Hartzell

That mild feeling of shame — the prefrontal cortex clutch shifting — is how kids learn to shift themselves from “forbidden” behavior to acceptable behavior. In its mild form, as Siegel and Hartzell describe, it’s a universal, useful feeling that keeps us on track. Think of it as the voice of conscience.

The “forbidden” behaviors that trigger shame are clearly taught, because they vary across cultures. But the mechanism for learning to regulate behavior so we can live communally is probably universal, given that all adults recognize the feeling.

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