

Shame and recognising how it may present in children.

The aim of this handout is to help special guardians to recognise the role that shame might play in a child's life so we can take steps to minimise its ongoing affects.

Why is an understanding of shame important to special guardians?

Shame is linked to specific **survival strategies** of children that have experienced trauma. It can often be the root of many worrying behaviours that special guardians might witness in the children in their care.

Behaviours linked to shame can be confusing and worrying; as special guardian's we need to learn how to **respond differently** to the behaviours that we see.

Sometimes feelings of shame can be **hidden** as children may internalise these feelings. In the early stages feelings of shame can lead to children being **overly compliant**, non-complaining or being 'easy to manage'. Consequently, carers may not detect feelings of shame but, left unaddressed, shame can **lead to more obvious extreme behaviours** such as depression, avoidance, anxiety, addiction and aggression.

If special guardians are better equipped to recognise the emotional and physical signs of the experience of shame, it could help to reduce the need for the involvement of specialist services in the future.

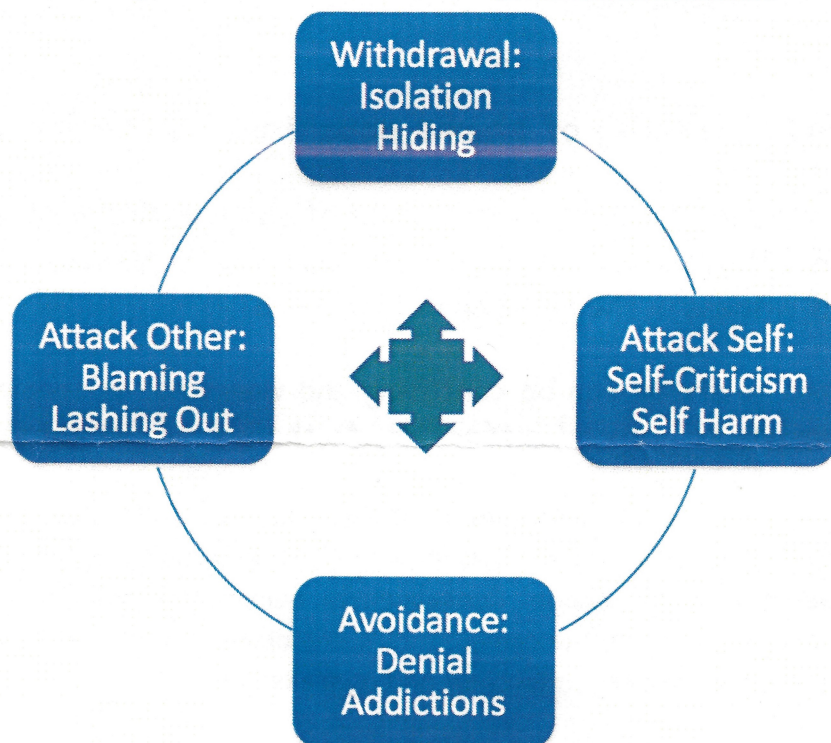
What is shame?

Shame has been described as a **set of intense feelings**, often leaving children feeling unworthy, unlovable, useless, and worthless. Children cope and deal with feelings of shame in different ways, either by **internalising**, **externalising**, or **denying** them completely.

To retain feelings of shame over long periods of time can be extremely damaging to a child's self-esteem. It can affect a child's **ability to trust** and form positive and **meaningful relationships** with others, even their special guardians.

Children will develop a **different sets of coping styles** to minimise the painful effects of shame. See below:

The Compass of Shame (Nathanson, 1992)



The behaviours described by some special guardians suggests that the children in their care often use an **attack other style** to cope, meaning the experience of shame is projected or **blamed on others**. In other words, when a child starts to feel the emotions of shame, it would be the fault of any individual present at the time when a person was triggered.

When children feel shame, their actions become ruled by the intensity of their emotions. Special guardians must then find ways to either **ignore or reduce** the

power of those emotions before they completely overwhelm the child in their care.

What is the difference between shame and guilt?

Feelings of guilt tend to **develop much later** than the feelings of shame.

Guilt is **language-based** whereas the feeling of shame is more of a **primitive 'feeling'** and has its roots firmly in the early developing infant self before the age of two.

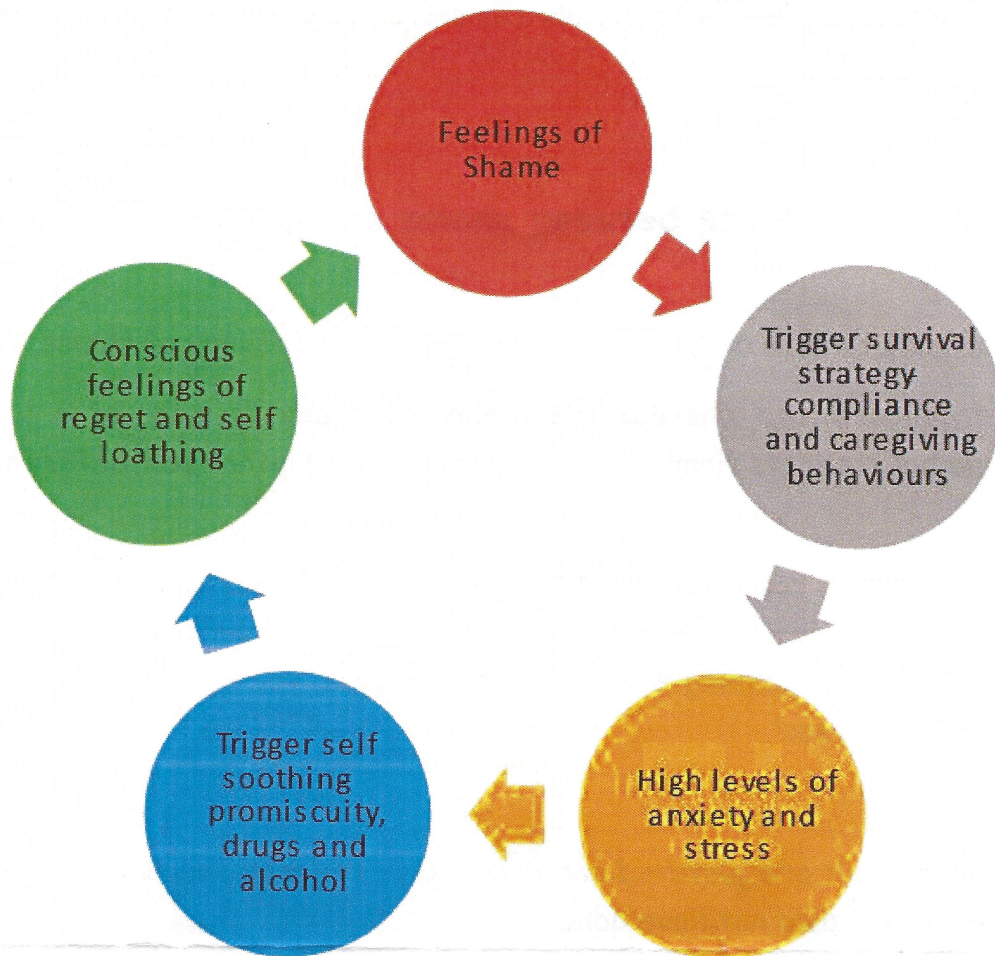
If we feel guilt, it is related to something that **we have done**. If we feel shame, it is related to **who we are**. Put more simply, if you feel guilt, you may refer to yourself as **'doing' something bad**; if you feel shame, you may refer to yourself as **'being a bad person'**.

Some forms of guilt are **justified** and can lead us towards correcting the things that we perhaps should not have done.

The difference between guilt and shame is that the feelings of guilt can be eased by trying to make amends and resolving wrongdoings. Shame on the other hand, is relates more to a personal flaw and not a behaviour so is harder to repair.

Shame causes children to fear that they will be **rejected**, so it tempts them to **disconnect** from others and avoid what causes them shame. It could lead some children down a path of deeper mental health problems, like **depression** and **substance abuse**.

Guilt is considered to be a more **mature emotion** than shame. Developmentally, the feelings of guilt do not tend to emerge until approximately the **age of three**. Shame on the other hand can develop much sooner from the age of **15 months**, which goes to show just how deeply ingrained this powerful emotion can be.



Shame in the absence of protection and comfort

Children in your care may have experienced a **difficult upbringing**, where danger and threat may have been present but they had no/limited access to a caring and protecting adult. This leaves the child to make their own conclusions about the emotional responses they witness from their caregivers, which can lead to the development of shame.

Shame in infancy is more likely to emerge when a caregiver shows **repeated disapproval and/or indifference** towards a child.

Early childhood shame can develop in respect of the following:

- Having the experience of being cared for by a parent/carer who is unable to 'attune' to the needs of their child (i.e. is not receptive/aware of a child emotional needs).

- Being the target of cruel jokes from an attachment figure
- Being made to feel like they are not good enough in the eyes of those who provide care.
- A lack of comfort and/or protection from a caregiver
- Early childhood abuse (sexual, physical, emotional etc.)
- Only being noticed when they do 'bad' things or being ignored entirely.
- Being blamed by a caregiver for a problem that developmentally, they cannot possibly be responsible for (i.e. a two-year-old spills water on an adult's mobile phone and is severely punished as a consequence)

Shame and associated behaviours

Attacking the self

- Putting themselves down and thinking of themselves as worthless
- Lacking in self-belief and confidence (regardless of how well they perform)
- Using self-harming behaviours (this can include overeating and undereating)
- Engaging in masochistic behaviours (or anything that may cause pain to the self)

Attack others

- Lashing out verbally and/or physically seemingly at random times
- Being unable to take responsibility for their own actions
- Blaming others entirely for any negative outcomes experienced by themselves

Behind every behaviour is a reason. When children appear to withdraw, become avoidant, aggressive, or ambivalent, it usually stems from a place of **fear and/or discomfort**.

I am unlovable

I split my family up

I don't matter

Everything is my fault

I can't do anything right

I don't deserve good things

I was a bad child

I deserve to be treated the way others treat me

I'm a bad person

MY NEEDS AND WANTS ARE NOT IMPORTANT

Nobody likes me

I have to hide my true emotions and thoughts

I'm never good enough!