



# Working To Build Healthy Relationships For Children in Care, Care Leavers and Adopted Children

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by Dr Kerry Davies | March 2023



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## Choices And Consequences

This leaflet explains how children learn appropriate behaviour and how this learning is influenced by the relationship a child has with their primary carer. It explains how natural and logical consequences can be used to help children learn to behave in more acceptable ways.

## Integrative Shame – Learning Right from Wrong

All children must learn socially acceptable behaviour (right and wrong). By the time children reach toddlerhood they experience many interactions throughout the day whereby their behaviour is deemed unacceptable – i.e., throwing food from a highchair. In a positive secure relationship, the child will experience the parent or carer changing their tone of voice and facial expressions and telling a child not to do something. The child will experience this break in attunement as unpleasant and will momentarily experience a sense of shame. In a secure relationship, the carer will quickly respond to the child's emotional expression by reattuning- e.g., changing their tone, picking the child up, re-engaging positively with the child and possibly expanding on the reason why the behaviour is not OK. The child learns through repeated interactions "I am OK, but that behaviour was not". They can integrate their knowledge about the acceptability of certain behaviour with their self-concept of "I'm OK, that behaviour wasn't OK". When children are able to integrate the idea that they are OK it is their behaviour that was not OK – they are more likely to be able to take responsibility for their behaviour, to express guilt or remorse and to want to make amends.



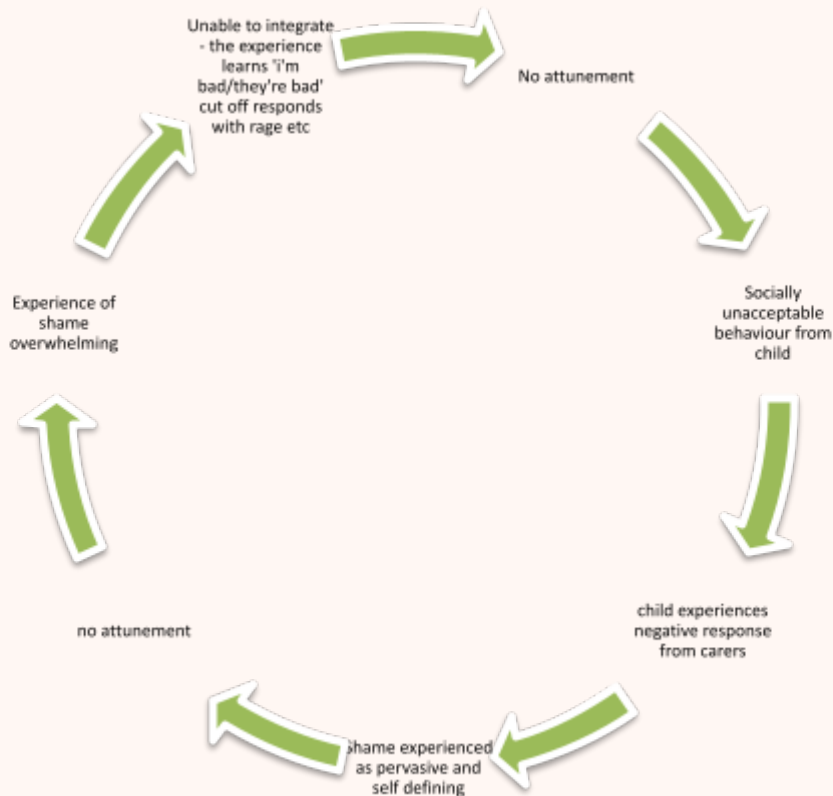
## A Model of Reintegrative Shame Would Look Like This:



## Disintegrative Shame

Where the relationship with a parent or carer is negative and insecure there is often no attunement between the child and carer. When a child does something wrong and is told not to, they also experience shame. However, unlike the securely attached child there is no re-attunement and the child is left continuing to experience shame. This shame then becomes a pervasive self-definition which feels all-encompassing and intolerable. Children will act to try to minimise this feeling by cutting off from it (dissociative response). They may do this by denying the action: “I didn’t do it” or by seeing it as a fault of the carer “you just don’t like me”. Children who are in shame cannot take responsibility for their behaviour. Deep down they fear it is because they are fundamentally ‘bad’ – they therefore try to deny this.





## Remaining Calm and Engaging with the Young Person

Children who have had difficult neglectful or abusive early experiences are likely to struggle to separate themselves from their behaviour. Because of this, they will find it hard to learn from sanctions in the same way that more securely attached children might do.

Children who have had poor early attachments will look for signs and indicators to confirm their belief that they are bad. They will be very sensitive to adults who look cross or angry and take this as an indicator that they are bad, worthless/unlovable. Triggering feelings of overwhelming shame and triggering a dissociative response.

Ideally adults/carers will need to remain calm and engaged with the young person. If a child is in the middle of a full-on outburst or rage – the first task will be trying to ensure the child’s and other’s safety. De-escalation techniques and soothing/nurturing strategies may be helpful at this point. Failing this, allowing the young person time and space to calm down away from the immediate presence of others can be helpful, but it is important that the child does not experience this as being abandoned and



attempts are made to reassure and connect with the child – to show that they are still valued and cared for.

## Choices And Natural and Logical Consequences

It can be helpful if children can see that they have choices about how they act and that for different choices there will be different consequences. This is the case for all of us. All the choices we make throughout the day can have ramifications for ourselves and others. Children are likely to learn from consequences and see these as a direct outcome of their behaviour if the consequences involve natural or logical outcomes. If children can see no connection between their behaviour and the consequences set by adults, it is more likely to be perceived as a punishment. For children who have had insecure attachments this is more likely to trigger shame and a dissociative response.

### Natural Consequences

Natural consequences are those that would naturally follow a behaviour. For example, if a child does not eat their lunch, they will be hungry. If a child hurts another child at break, that child may not want to play with them next break time. If a child tells a parent/carer a lie about not having homework, the carer will not trust their word next time regarding homework.

### Logical Consequences

Logical consequences are those that make sense following a behaviour for example:

- If a child hurt another child, writing a note to say sorry.
- If a child breaks another child's toy, they must contribute to a replacement with their pocket money.
- If a child always struggles with their behaviour during a certain lesson, they might need a Teaching Assistant (TA) to support them in that lesson.



## Punishment

Children are more likely to perceive something as a punishment if it does not make sense to them why it is being set. A child hurts another child at school therefore they must miss football practice.

Choices and consequences can work well if carers/adults can remain calm and engaged with the child. Children can learn in advance what consequences may follow particular behaviours. Children can then be given these options in a neutral way.

“You can choose to do your homework now – when I can help you – or you can do it later instead of watching the film with us”.

“You can hold my hand walking to the shop, or you will have to stay at home next time I go”.

## In Summary:

- Positive early relationships help children separate their sense of self from their behaviours.
- Remaining calm and engaging with children/young people during an incident prevents children experiencing overwhelming shame and cutting off or denying their behaviour.
- Using natural or logical consequences helps children take responsibility for their actions and learn from their behaviour.
- Following through a consequence allows the carer to establish boundaries with the child.
- Giving choices and consequences teaches a child that their behaviour represents the result of their choices.

If you have any questions, please contact me using the form on my website:

[drkerrydavies.com/contact](http://drkerrydavies.com/contact)

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