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## Reducing shame and resolving trauma while fixing relationships

**Why is it important?**

Reciprocity is a key element to any relationship. However, for families with children who experience a variety of mental health and behavioral challenges, reciprocity is often limited. These youth are unable to return the resources they utilize from their families; time, energy, finances, and emotions are often depleted due to the child's needs. It is by teaching these children how to begin fixing their mistakes that they learn accountability, empathy and reciprocity.

Those who struggle with reciprocity often have high degrees of shame. When working with those who have high degrees of shame, it is imperative to teach and reinforce fixing mistakes and repairing relationships. Shame is utilized as an umbrella term for feeling worthless, helpless, unlovable, or powerless. Shame limits the hope for change and stops the processing of trauma. Bessel van der Kolk, a leading researcher of trauma, speaks to the necessity of increased competence and attachment to safety in order to process trauma. The repair process outlined here is designed to decrease shame, increase competence and safety, and support the processing of trauma.

For children with high degrees of shame, repairing mistakes is overwhelmingly scary and they are not able to see a fix as a possibility. They view their shortcomings and natural consequences as evidence they are not worthy which only feeds their shame. As the shame increases, the survival response is activated and decision making is negatively impacted. However, it is through completing repairs that children will learn empathy and competence which will result in a decrease in shame and increase in healthy relationships. When there is no mechanism for decreasing shame, children will often pretend the offense didn't happen, which can present as them not caring, and their shame increases. Without a repair process, the shame cycle continues.

In order to teach the repair process, we first have to break behaviors into 3 categories: pulls, pushes, and fixes. Pulls are behaviors that make others feel closer to the individual. The goal of a pull is to increase intimacy and strengthen relationships while sending the message to those around them that they are valuable and important. These can include any instances of the individual being respectful, responsible, or fun to be around. Pushes are the opposite of pulls; they are behaviors that make others feel less close to the individual. It is important to emphasize that when individuals are not being respectful, responsible, or fun to be around they are hurting both their heart and the heart of the other person involved. Because of this, pushes are behaviors that require repairs. Fixes are pulls that are done as a way to repair a push.

**How is it done?**

The following fixing process is most effectively taught in a therapeutic setting where a clinician supports the practicing of appropriate responses. Like any skill, it takes time and practice to fine tune the process to the specific needs of the family. The goal of fixing is not to punish the child, but to offer opportunities to fix their choices and repair their relationships. Fixing is most effective when done consistently. When we focus on fixing the smaller offenses, we can often avoid the bigger offenses.

Fixing provides the opportunity to take accountability and repair mistakes without increasing shame while allowing the individual to see their mistakes as temporary, not permanent. Taking responsibility is often avoided by minimization, denial, and blame. Minimizing happens with statements such as "I only…/ I just…", "It was broken anyways", or "You never use it anymore". Denial sounds like "I found it like this" or "I don't know what happened". And blame is often placed on others or on emotions. These are statements such as "You made me mad" or "I only did _____ because you did _____". If responsibility is not taken, it is impossible to fix.

Apologies are often not accepted for one of three reasons: the person hurt does not feel the person apologizing understands what they did wrong, they do not feel the person apologizing truly understands the impact they had, or they feel the person will do it again despite apologizing. This fixing process is designed to counteract all three of potential outcomes. Apologies that are strong and meaningful include a five-step process where responsibility is taken. It is important to ensure there is eye contact during the repair process as it reminds the individual that they are safe and can fix things.

*Step 1: "I'm sorry…"*
It can be difficult to have meaning behind "I'm sorry" when they are words that are said so frequently and are followed by behaviors that do not change. For many people "I'm sorry" means "I'm sorry I got caught" not "I'm sorry I did _____". The words "I'm sorry" is an indication of attempting an apology, not an apology itself. This is the first step in the repair process as it **demonstrates a willingness to complete the repair** and move forward in the relationship. When this apology is followed by taking responsibility and engaging in a fix, it has meaning. We maintain teaching the step of "I'm sorry" because its socially expected when an individual has wronged another.

*Step 2: "For…"*
This step **supports the child taking responsibility** and owning their specific actions. This step is crucial in decreasing shame as it puts the focus on the behavior itself, not the value of the child. Their low self-worth is challenged each time they are able to take responsibility and not be rejected. Without the ability to take accountability, the child loses the power to change. If they are unable to name the behavior and take responsibility, the repair process will be paused until the behavior can be specifically identified. This step can be incredibly painful for children

because they have a hard time differentiating between "I did bad" and "I am bad". They fear if they say it out loud, it will be so bad that their parents will no longer want them.

### Step 3: "I sent you the message…."
Being able to identify the impact we have on others is how we **develop empathy.** The wording here is crucial as it reinforces the accountability and responsibility taken in step 2. The phrase "I made you feel…" needs to be corrected and changed to focus on the message that was sent. This takes the control away of one individual forcing another to feel something and increases the awareness of the impact their actions have on others. Often the message is "What I want is more important than what you want/ more important than our relationship".

### Step 4: "I would like to fix it by…"
It is during this step that the child suggests a way to undo the message they sent in step 3. The fix should be specific and have a set time to be completed. By taking the time to find a task to counteract the message and planning to complete this task, the child is again challenging their own beliefs of their low self-worth and **empowering themselves.** Another aspect of this step is the beginning of seeing forgiveness in caregivers 'eyes and the fostering of hope in an ability to repair situations.

Fixes are not only focused on correcting the behavior, but also correcting the message that was sent that put strain on the relationship. For example, if a child steals $20 from their parent they will need to pay back the money AND complete a fix for the message they sent with the behavior. Fixing is most effective when they require more energy than the initial push. When this process is still new it can be difficult to come up with fixes on our own. Children may need assistance in identifying appropriate fixes and may seek guidance from a trusted adult. Fixes should be age appropriate and often start as skill based (chore) with the goal to evolve into more emotionally based (time with parent).

### Step 5: "Will you please tell me if that would work?"
Only the person who has been wronged can determine if the fix is appropriate for the situation. This step shows agreement between child and parent as to what the fix will be and when the fix will happen. This agreement means that if the fix is completed correctly, it will undo the message that was sent and bring the individuals involved closer to each other. This provides the opportunity to **build competence and confidence** in their ability to complete a task and repair a relationship. Through fixing, the individual is empowered to create positive energy, reduce shame, and pull their family close.

When thinking about a timeline for fixing to happen, it is most effective for there to be a natural motivator such as an upcoming event the child wants to attend or want to do. Instead of demanding apologies, we wait for the want and then respond with the need for fixing. This could look like a child asking to go to a birthday party and the parent responding with "I'd love for you to go as soon as your fixing is done." Because the parents are in control of the

environment this approach allows the utilization of natural motivators rather than forcing an apology on adult's terms.

Once the fix is completed it is important to show appreciation. However, due to the high levels of shame that are present the appreciation should be focused on the work done and not on the child themselves. For example, if a child has swept the stairs, there will be a greater benefit to saying "The stairs look so clean, someone must've been working hard" than you will saying "You're a great kid." This is because the positive feedback does not match how the child feels inside and may result in bigger behaviors that reinforce how they see themselves.

Fixing is not a consequence for poor behavior; it is an opportunity to reduce shame and repair damage done to a relationship either intentionally or unintentionally. Additionally, fixing brings the relationship back to baseline, it does not earn the child any privileges; pulls are required after fixing to earn privileges. The fixing process can feel complicated and is best done under trained clinician who can fine tune the process to the specific needs of the family.