



To create safe and brave spaces of belonging,  
we need to commit to doing *our work* before we do  
*the work* and to working within our scope and skill.

### ***Integration Idea***

# **Adding Shame, Guilt, Humiliation, Embarrassment, Empathy, and Self-Compassion to the Social Emotional Learning Vocabulary**

#### **Key concepts:**

- Increasing emotional literacy by adding the four self-conscious affects—shame, guilt, humiliation, and embarrassment—to existing social emotional learning vocabularies, and modeling the correct usage with students.
- Teaching the subtle, but important differences, between these four emotions. In everyday discussions, we often substitute one for the other, and we often avoid using the word shame altogether. But the differences between these words (and these emotions) have important implications.
  - Shame – Based on extensive research, Brené defines shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging. We feel like something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection. Shame often leaves us feeling immobilized, or worse, feeling ready to strike out as a way of offloading the pain of disconnection.
  - Guilt – Feeling bad about something you have said or done, or failed to say or do. We feel guilt when we compare our actions to our values and they don’t match up. It creates a sense of psychological discomfort. This comparison and discomfort often motivates us in a positive direction, either apologizing or doing things differently in the future.
  - Humiliation – The difference between humiliation and shame is that we don’t believe we deserve our humiliation. Both experiences /emotions can feel the same way, but with humiliation, the “not-deserving” part helps us to not internalize it or buy into the messaging. Humiliation can actually leave us feeling angry, which is a better alternative to internalizing. This is

why teaching shame resilience to students and helping students understand what's okay and not okay about how people talk to us and treat us is critical.

- Embarrassment – Embarrassment is a feeling of discomfort that often doesn't last very long. What differentiates embarrassment from shame is that when we do something embarrassing, we know we're not the only ones who have done that thing. Shame makes us feel completely alone. When we do something embarrassing, it can even be funny shortly after the moment has passed.
- The most important difference to remember between shame and guilt is that the thoughts that accompany shame are focused on the self ("*I am bad*"), whereas thoughts associated with guilt focus on a specific behavior ("*I did something bad*").
- Although people tend to assume that shame and guilt are both "bad," research has revealed important differences between the two. More specifically, shame tends to have negative outcomes whereas guilt can be adaptive and helpful.
- Explaining that self-compassion and empathy can be useful tools when experiencing self-conscious emotions (shame, guilt, humiliation, and embarrassment).
  - Self-compassion – Treating yourself with kindness; talking to yourself like you would talk to someone you love or care about.
  - Empathy— Connecting with people so we know that we're not alone when we're in struggle. It's a way to connect to the *emotion* another person is experiencing, not the *situation*. Empathy doesn't require that we've experienced the same situation that they are going through. Empathy is the antidote to shame. Shame can't survive empathy.
- We know that shame proneness (versus guilt proneness) can develop rapidly during the primary school years. In addition to identifying and removing shame from systems, we need to help students develop an explicit understanding of the differences between shame, guilt, humiliation, and embarrassment if we want them to increase their sense of agency and resilience.
- It's important to understand that perfectionism is a function of shame. The areas where we struggle the most with perfectionism are the areas where we are most likely to experience shame. Perfectionism is not striving for excellence - which is internally motivated. Perfectionism is driven by external evaluation - *what will people think?* Self-compassion and empathy can also be helpful tools for shame driven by perfectionism.
- Removing shame from systems and teaching students shame resilience are not mutually exclusive. Naming shame and understanding how it works and how it's different from other similar emotions is equally important to resilience. The lesson focused on empathy can be a great lead in or follow up to this topic.

### **Be mindful:**

- Doing clinical or therapeutic work with students around issues of shame, guilt, humiliation, and embarrassment is outside the scope or skill of what should happen in the classroom.
- Shame is still used as a classroom management tool in schools across the world. We can change a child's behavior quickly with shame; however, in addition to temporarily changing a behavior, it crushes a child's self-worth and spirit. Shame also corrodes our belief that we can be better and do better. Children experience shame as the threat of being unlovable. Shame is often processed as trauma for all of us, and for children young enough to still be physically dependent on us, the threat of being unlovable can feel like a threat to survival.

### **Classroom Discussion Ideas:**

Shame, guilt, humiliation, and embarrassment are integral themes in many books and films. They are often central in YA literature. One of the best ways to teach emotional literacy around these topics is to teach students to recognize emotion and name it in characters. Again, the goal here is to increase the student's emotional vocabulary, thereby increasing shame resilience. Below are examples of how to teach the self-conscious affects. We find that even with adults it's best to teach about these emotions by comparing and contrasting them to one another, rather than just focusing on one or two.

**Examples:** When teaching the difference between the concepts, we've found that students resonate with this example: A student does poorly on a quiz. Let's try to figure out the emotion based on the student's self-talk or how they process someone's comments:

- *"I suck. I'm a terrible student."* This is shame. The focus is on self, not behavior. It's not helpful and it can make the student feel more stuck because changing who we are is more difficult than changing a behavior. We can start to believe shaming messages about who we are if we tell them to ourselves enough or if we hear them from others.
- *"I can't believe I didn't study. Not studying was a terrible decision."* This is guilt. I may be a good student, but deciding not to study was not a good choice. Guilt makes us uncomfortable because we're holding up something we've done or failed to do and comparing it with who we want to be. That discomfort can drive change—and that's a good thing.
- A friend tells everyone at your table: *"Look at his grade! You're so stupid."* You wish you could disappear. You're thinking to yourself "I am so stupid!" This is shame. You're buying into the message about who you are. Let's compare that to the next example.
- A friend tells everyone at your table: *"Look at his grade! You're so stupid."* You wish you could disappear, and it feels terrible. However, you're thinking to yourself "That's not ok. I'm not stupid, and I don't deserve to have anyone talk to me or about me that way." That's humiliation. Humiliation seems close to shame but there's a big difference—you know you didn't deserve that. That matters because it keeps you from buying into that message.
- You walk out of the bathroom with toilet paper on your shoe or you mispronounce a word. If you're thinking *"That's awkward, but I know I'm not the only one who has ever done that"*—that's embarrassment. It goes away and it can even become funny. It doesn't make you question your worth.
- VERY important to note that these emotions are different for all of us. What's shaming for me might be embarrassing or humiliating for someone else. It depends on our story, our history, and our expectations.
- Self-compassion is talking to yourself like you'd talk to a friend. For example, if you make a lower grade than you expected and you say, *"I'm so stupid. I'm a loser,"*—that's not how you would talk to a friend.

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**Books:**

*Daring Greatly*

*Rising Strong*

**Videos ([brenebrown.com/dcvideos](https://www.brenebrown.com/dcvideos)):**

*SXSW EDU 2017: Daring Classrooms*

**Blogs / Articles:**

Blog Post *Shame v. guilt*

