

Shame on us: Shaming some kids makes them more aggressive

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Aren't you ashamed of yourself? All these years, you've been trying to build up your child's self-esteem, and now a growing body of research suggests you may be making a big mistake. A study published in the December issue of *Child Development* finds that early adolescents with high self-esteem are more likely to react aggressively when they feel ashamed than their peers with lower levels of self-esteem.

"Young teens with low self-esteem apparently don't feel the need to protect their punctured egos," said University of Michigan psychologist Brad J. Bushman, a co-author of the study with colleagues from VU University and Utrecht University in The Netherlands.

For the study, Bushman, Sander Thomaes, and colleagues conducted an experiment with 163 children ages 10 to 13, from Michigan middle schools. Almost all were white, and slightly more than half (54 percent) were males.

A few weeks before participating in the on-line experiments, the young people filled out a questionnaire designed to assess their levels of self-esteem and narcissism.

The researchers measured self-esteem by assessing the degree to which participants were satisfied with themselves and the way they led their lives. Sample statements included, "Some kids like the kind of person they are," and "Some kids are not very happy with the way they do a lot of things." They were asked if they were like that.

Narcissism included grandiose views of themselves, inflated feelings of superiority and entitlement, and exploitative interpersonal attitudes, assessed by questions such as, "Without me, our class would be much less fun;" "Kids like me deserve something extra;" and "I often succeed in getting admiration."

For the experiment, children were told they would be competing on an Internet reaction-time game called FastKid! against an opponent of the same sex and age from a school in Columbus, Ohio (where the Buckeyes live!). In reality, there was no opponent; the computer controlled all events. Those who were randomly selected for the "shame condition" were told that their opponent was one of the worst players in the supposed tournament, and they should easily win; when they lost, their last-place ranking was displayed on a website they believed that everyone could see. Children were told they could blast their opponent with a loud noise after winning a trial.

The narcissistic kids were more aggressive than others, but only after they had been shamed. "Narcissists seem highly motivated to create and maintain a grandiose view of self," the researchers wrote. "They tend to interpret social situations in terms of how they reflect on the self, and they engage in self-regulatory strategies to protect self-esteem when they need to. As shameful situations constitute a threat to grandiosity, narcissistic shame-induced aggression can likely be viewed as defensive effort to maintain self-worth."

The researchers found no support for the traditional view that low self-esteem underlies aggression. In fact, they found that high self-esteem increased narcissistic shame-induced aggression.

"It could be that narcissistic kids with high self-esteem are more vulnerable to shameful events than are kids with low self-esteem," said Bushman. "Or, they may differ in the way they deal with those events."

The implications for parents and teachers: Don't shame a child who has a high opinion of himself.

Source: University of Michigan

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