

Protecting Progress: Avoiding Shame, Power, and Exclusion

As we'll examine in even greater detail in chapter 10, the core principles of trauma-informed care make one thing very clear: if we aim to be trauma informed, we must do all we can to avoid the use of practices that are rooted in "power and control," as well as those that our students may experience as "shaming."

For a child with a trauma history, these methods can easily retrigger the feelings of the very dynamics they've spent years surviving—being overpowered, shamed, or controlled by someone bigger, stronger, or emotionally volatile. Even when a child doesn't show a strong outward response in the moment, the use of these methods still activates their stress response system. They may be calm or compliant on the outside, while their nervous system is quietly shifting into fight, flight, freeze, or shutdown.

Worst still—these practices can undermine the collective benefit of all the other valuable strategies we're working so hard to implement.

One doesn't cancel out the other—the actions we're taking that do align with trauma-informed principles can't neutralize constant feelings of threat inflicted by a continuous cycle of shaming or punishment.

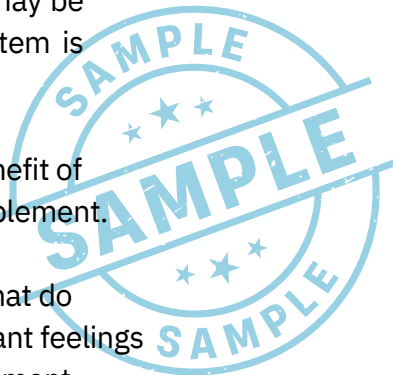
If we're using trauma-informed tools in one hand but holding onto shaming or power-based techniques in the other, the nervous system doesn't weigh them evenly.

It doesn't average them out. The experience of threat always wins.

And when that happens, our best efforts—regulation strategies, connection-building, routines, safety cues—get overridden by the child's protective systems. That's why being trauma-informed requires more than adding good practices. It means subtracting harmful ones, too. We have to ask ourselves:

What messages is this child likely internalizing from this system?

How is it shaping the way they see themselves in the world?



Recognize that you were doing the best you knew how based on what you knew at the time. Once we know better we can do better.

One of the most deeply moving reminders of this came during a training we led in a district in Arizona. During the segment of the workshop where we introduce what you'll come to know later in this book as "Systemic Precautions" for trauma-informed FBA's, Doris offered a gentle but important preface—a message we always share:

"This is a no shame zone."



We emphasize to participants: if you're hearing us talk about a practice you've used in the past, or you may be currently using— and you're recognizing it may have caused emotional harm to a student—this is not about blame. Recognize that you were doing the best you knew how based on what you knew at the time. Once we know better, we can do better. Please be gracious with yourself and know that you can make changes moving forward. We just encourage you to think about how you can adjust any systems that involve public display of performance of any kind.

Doris began to share a story she'd read about a kindergarten classroom using a "clip chart" system—a behavior management approach where each child's name is attached to a clip that gets moved up and down on a color chart usually displayed on the classroom wall. Students start the day with their clip on green, and if directed based on their behavior, must move their clip down to yellow, or to red.

The story focused not on a child with behavior challenges, but on a little girl who had the skills to be compliant—and was also deeply empathetic. After enduring significant distress watching her peers experience the shame and embarrassment of being "clipped down" to yellow or red, she began asking her parents to tape her mouth shut before leaving for school so she wouldn't accidentally say something wrong.

After a few weeks passed, she came home after having had to move her own clip down to yellow for the first time and told her parents she wanted to kill herself.

She was five years old...

As Doris looked up from reading the story, struggling to maintain composure, she saw a teacher in her 30s near the back of the room stand to her feet with tears in her eyes, and quietly slip out. Doris couldn't dismiss the group for their next break quickly

enough, heading out into the hallway to find her and offer an apology and reassurance—assuming the story had triggered guilt or shame for something she'd used in her own classroom.

But as Doris approached and started to apologize, the teacher raised her hand in a gesture to stop:

“No ...You don't understand. My son is a second grader in this district—my own district. His teacher uses one of those clip systems. And every morning when he walks into class, before he even puts away his backpack or hangs up his coat, he goes directly to that clip chart and moves his name from green to red.”

Doris is not ashamed to say—they were both in tears at that point. It stopped her stone cold with the thought:

“Who does this little boy see himself as?—A ‘red kid!’”

He doesn't see himself as misunderstood. Or as dysregulated. Or as maybe having some lagging skills in impulse control or executive functioning or attention...

He sees himself as one of “those kids”—who doesn't get the rewards, doesn't earn the privileges, isn't good enough, never gets it right, doesn't belong.



The long-term consequences of systems like this?

An instructor in one of our trauma certification programs whom we deeply respect once said it this way:

“I think our elementary schools are creating our middle school gangs.”

That's a strong statement! Did he mean it?

Let's consider:

When children are learning in kindergarten or first or second grade that they're “a red kid,” and others are “green kids” who don't want to be friends with “red kids”—we're not just enforcing rules.

We're teaching children to sort and separate and rank themselves. And we're doing it in ways that create social friction and a sense of exclusion for the students who are suffering and most in need of support.

We're teaching that some children belong, and others don't.



Now put yourself in the system—would you “stay on green”?

Let’s pause for a moment and turn the tables.

Imagine you show up to work tomorrow and your building leader tells you there’s a new district policy requiring all staff to wear a “light-up pin-backed button” like a name badge. The button is green when it’s first handed to you.

You start your day struggling to get students to remain in their seats, and a couple have even roamed into the hallway and are bouncing a ball on the floor, causing other staff to peer into the hallway to see what’s going on.

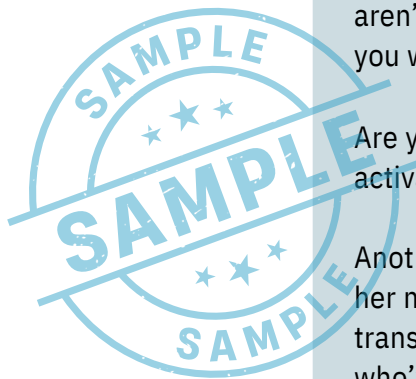
As luck would have it, your principal comes walking down the hall just in time to see you raising your voice at the two students to prompt them to get back into class. As they duck into class, she waves you over a few feet from your classroom door, and albeit gently, informs you that if things aren’t looking better when she gets back from her meeting, you won’t be able to “remain on green.”

Are you possibly feeling your stress response system activating just thinking about this?

Another stroke of poor luck—your principal returns from her meeting early, just in time to see a chaotic hallway transition and the same two boys, along with two others who’ve now joined their antics, whacking a couple of girls on the heads with rolled up Scholastic magazines. She clicks her newly issued remote, and the button pinned to your chest is now glowing yellow instead of green.

Usually, once you leave your students with the technology teacher, you head off to decompress with coworkers who often gather in the lounge for a snack break since you rarely ever have time to grab a bite of breakfast before dashing out the door in the morning.

But today, it doesn’t feel so inviting—the thought of having to explain your yellow button is enough to send you straight for your classroom instead, where you rummage in the closet for some rice crackers you’re pretty sure have been stuffed in there since the beginning of the school year.



How exposed would you feel?

How vulnerable does it feel for your performance to be linked to a progression of colors that indicate decreasing acceptability, displayed where all your peers are sure to see it?

How long would it take you to start looking for a job in another district?

If this scenario activates your stress response just reading it, imagine what it does to a child!

A child without your cognitive maturity.

A child without the option to leave.

You may be thinking: Okay... We get the point! Why won't these authors just move on?

Because there is nothing in this book that is more important than this—recognizing, and not just recognizing but feeling—the impact we're having on a child's identity when we use methods of power and control, methods that expose and shame, methods that exclude.

If we want our trauma-informed FBAs and behavior support plans to actually work, we must protect their impact by removing practices that undermine them.

If we want our trauma-informed FBAs and behavior support plans to actually work, we must protect their impact by removing practices that undermine them.



“What I’m telling you as a researcher, from fifty years of data, not just mine, there is not a SINGLE DROP of empirical evidence that shows us that shame is a good way to change behavior.”

—Brene Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability* 199

Not only do shaming methods fail to change behavior, they prevent change. They drive the nervous system into survival, activating the child into a state of protection—as they would any of us—fracturing the relationship and connection so desperately needed for the implementation of any meaningful, durable support plan.

If we don't have relationship, we've got nothing!

Investing time and energy into making the shift toward trauma-informed behavior supports is absolutely worth it—but only if we also commit to protecting that progress.

That means doing all we can to avoid practices that negate our efforts through shaming, exposing, or overpowering the very students who most need to feel safe, capable, and connected.

Because if we're not eliminating systems that add to their trauma...

We're adding to it instead.

How Do We Know if “It’s Working”?

For decades, the primary measuring stick for behavior interventions in schools has been one word: Compliance.

Did the student stop doing the behavior?

Did they do what they were told?

Did they do what was asked—when it was asked—without pushback?

If so, the intervention was considered successful. If not, it was considered a failure.

But if we are to become trauma-informed and neuroscience-aligned, this must change. We must operate from a new conviction: that if we are using strategies that align with what neuroscience tells us about how to change the brain and nervous system—then it's working.

Even when surface behaviors haven't shifted.

Even when there's resistance or dysregulation.

Even when others question your progress.

If we're supporting nervous system regulation, building skills, sending cues of safety, we are doing the good work of behavior change. We're just doing it at the level where durable change actually begins!

When it comes to evaluating progress on behavior support plans or IEPs, we must rethink what we're measuring. Instead of focusing data collection on whether a child is “behaving” or



whether a certain behavior has “stopped,” we need to track growth in the areas that precede these outcomes:

- Is the child demonstrating more frequent moments of self-regulation?
- Are we seeing more signals of safety and fewer of protection?
- Are we seeing signs of skill growth—in executive functioning, emotional regulation, or relational capacity?
- Is the child increasingly able to meet classroom or school expectations, even in small ways?

These are the indicators that matter.

Because when we focus on the nervous system shifts and incremental skill growth, we create the conditions for change that is real, internal, and lasting—not coerced or short-lived.

It’s true: we may not see results immediately. But if we follow through long enough—repeating regulation practices, co-regulating through challenges, teaching skills in context—we engage the nervous system in the ways that will repattern it.

And that’s when changes start to show on the surface.

Eventually, the behaviors adults might describe as “adaptive,” “appropriate,” or even “compliant,” begin to emerge—but not because the child is just trying to avoid punishment—because their body and brain are now able to meet the demands being placed on them.


This is real compliance.

Not the kind rooted in fear or power dynamics—the kind that grows from capacity. And intrinsic motivation.

The kind that lasts.

In our trainings, we often summarize it this way on a slide titled: Redefine “It’s Working”

THE CHALLENGE...?
 -To redefine “working”
 ...We must redefine how we know
 whether an intervention is “working” or not.

“It’s working”  Compliance