

**Youth Culture Lesson**  
**Finding Teachable Moments in Culture**  
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**Shame on You: Can Guilt Help Us Be Better People?**

By Paul Asay

**What Happened:**

New York City is trying a new technique to keep the city's teens from getting pregnant: shame. New ads—plastered around subways and bus shelters—are designed to stigmatize teen pregnancy to encourage teens not to give birth to children they can't afford.

The ads feature somber or crying toddlers expressing a variety of foreboding statistics. "Got a good job? I cost thousands of dollars each year," reads one. "I'm twice as likely not to graduate high school because you had me as a teen," declares another.

Many New Yorkers hate the ads. Shaming teens is not the way to keep them from getting pregnant, they argue. "What does this campaign say about someone like myself and millions of teen mothers out there?" said Annabel Palma, a Bronx city councilwoman who gave birth to a child when she was 17. "When you're not putting resources to help teens stay on the right path, you just can't create a campaign that's going to scare them into correct behaviors."

Others say shame has been a powerful agent to keep folks on the straight and narrow for thousands of years. We're all wired to feel guilt and to care about what other people think about us. Sociologists argue it's one of the prime ingredients in keeping social order.

"We like to think of ourselves as rational creatures, but the truth is that emotions [such as] fear, disgust or shame can often have a more powerful effect on human behavior than objective information and careful reasoning," writes Richard Reeves in *The New York Times*. "Most of us think twice about making a choice that will make us feel ashamed. Feelings count for as much as facts."

**Talk About It:**

Guilt and shame can be useful emotions. It's true both can help keep us on the straight and narrow when nothing else will. People who aren't capable of feeling guilty tend to get in a lot more trouble, but shame also can make us feel needlessly horrible, as well as lead to other problems. It can encourage us to keep secrets or lie. It can keep us from getting the help we need.

Do you realize there's a difference in healthy shame (discretion) and unhealthy or toxic shame (disgrace)?

In what ways do you think shame can be a good emotion? Has there been a time when shame—knowing your friends or family might think worse of you—kept you from doing something bad or harmful? Can you talk about it?

When does guilt and shame get in the way? Have you ever felt *too* guilty about something? Did that type of shame hamper your efforts to fix whatever made you ashamed in the first place?

**What the Bible Says:**

The Bible talks about shame and guilt—not typically as something good or bad, but as a natural emotion we’re all capable of feeling. Adam and Eve were ashamed of their nakedness we read in Genesis. Adam told God: “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; so I hid” (Gen. 3:10).

Sometimes, the Bible gives examples of people who should be ashamed, but aren’t: “Even when their drinks are gone, they continue their prostitution; their rulers clearly love shameful ways” (Hosea 4:18).

The Bible tells us especially that we never should be ashamed of our faith: “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when He comes in His Father’s glory with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38).

Also, in God we have no reason for shame: “Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame” (Isa. 50:7).

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*Paul Asay has covered religion for The Washington Post, Christianity Today, [Beliefnet.com](http://Beliefnet.com) and The (Colorado Springs) Gazette. He writes about culture for *Plugged In* and wrote the Batman book [God on the Streets of Gotham](#) (Tyndale). He lives in Colorado Springs with wife, Wendy, and two children. Follow him on Twitter @AsayPaul.*