

Overcoming Parental Guilt

What is parental guilt?

Parental guilt is the feeling that you're not doing enough for your children—that you're letting them down in some way, even though you're trying hard to be a good parent. Working parents can also feel parental guilt when they sense that their family priorities are keeping them from doing their best at work. Parental guilt can make you feel that you aren't being successful as either a parent or a worker.



What causes parental guilt?

Parental guilt is based on your love for your children and your efforts to be the best parent you can be for them. It often arises when you have competing priorities in life—as a parent, as a worker, or as a supporter of a friend or family member who needs your help. You might feel parental guilt over:

- » Not being able to do it all—not being the perfect parent, partner, worker, friend, and family member
- » Not spending more time with your children, perhaps because of other responsibilities, such as holding a job or caring for an aging parent
- » Not earning more money to provide for your children, perhaps because you've chosen to work less and spend more time with them
- » Being short-tempered or irritable at times with your children
- » The amount of screen time you allow your children

Guilt can be a useful emotion when you've really done something wrong. It can motivate you to correct your behavior, apologize, or make amends—but parental guilt is often unproductive. When it's driven by unreasonable self-criticism and unrealistic expectations, it can make you feel like a failure when you're doing the best you can.

HOW TO OVERCOME PARENTAL GUILT

Understand that you are not alone. They may not talk about it, but many parents have similar feelings of parental guilt. It can be hard to be a parent, and you aren't alone in feeling that you sometimes fall short of your ideals.

Practice self-compassion. When you find yourself being self-critical and sinking into parental guilt, imagine how you would talk to a good friend facing the same challenges. Practice talking to yourself with that same compassion. "You are doing your very best." "Just take a few deep breaths, calm down, and you can handle this."

Make space for your own needs. As you make sure your kids have what they need, pay attention to your own needs, too. Coordinate with your partner or with friends or family members to make time for occasional breaks to recharge. When you're able to attend to your own needs, you'll be happier, calmer, and more present for your children when you're with them.

Stop comparing yourself to others. Much of parental guilt comes from false comparisons, and comparing yourself to others on social media is one of the biggest traps. Social media tends to present a sunny fiction, not the way life really is. When was the last time you saw a post from someone about the meal they overcooked or the afternoon their child cried for two hours?

Adjust your expectations. Parental guilt is often rooted in unrealistic expectations. There's no such thing as a perfect parent. Accept that you are human and do the best you can.

Accept that you are continually learning as a parent. Just as there's no such thing as a perfect parent, there's no one right way to parent. Every child has a unique personality and unique needs, and those needs change over time. Approach parenting as a learning process, one in which you're constantly exploring what works best for you and your family. As with any learning process, you're bound to make mistakes. Accept them as lessons to learn from, rather than unforgivable failures.

Get support if you need it. Sometimes talking with supportive friends or family members isn't enough. If low mood or feelings of guilt or overload are making it difficult to cope, seek professional help. Your doctor or your employee assistance program can offer guidance and direct you to appropriate support. That might be a mental health counselor, a parenting specialist, or both.

Parenting Classes

CARE offers free parenting classes. Parents can choose from three different classes, depending on the age of their child:

- » Parenting Young Children - for parents of children ages 0-5
- » Parenting School Age Children - for parents of children ages 5-12
- » Parenting Teens - for parents of children ages 12-18



Visit www.careofsem.com/parenting-services/classes/ for a complete list of classes.