



Coping With Parental Guilt

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“Parental guilt—a familiar phenomenon—may have its roots in reality. However, it can lead to nothing but decay unless it is recognized and used realistically.”

If mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or some chronic physical ailment is the diagnosis for a child, how do parents react? Frightened and self-assaulting, they are likely to say, first of all, “What did WE do?”

Parental guilt—a familiar phenomenon—may have its roots in reality. However, it can lead to nothing but decay unless it is recognized and used realistically.

Guilt is a common denominator of parents. Mothers and fathers of Rhodes Scholars share many sensations of inadequacy. The gnawing of guilt may occur even when children are average, attractive, and well adjusted. Parents then are often beset with the idea that they could have done still better and could have inspired such children to be brilliant, beautiful and perfectly adjusted. Popular magazines, psychological literature, and motion pictures often combine to make parents think that whatever bothers their children is directly related to what they have or have not done.

Changing cultural patterns have resulted in some confusion about parental roles. The family structure of previous generations, where “father knows best” was the guideline, has given way to group decision-making. The imperviousness of parents to outside criticism has been replaced frequently by their sensitivity to every observation and even every cult.

The storybook literature, the momentary glimpses of parents and children romping in a park, the dreams which prospective mothers and fathers carry—all these combine to make the reality of colic, dirty diapers, and tantrums unpalatable. Response to the wet and smelly infant (who was supposed to be pink-cheeked and placid) may be one of anger and hostility. And then, when crisis has diminished and emotions have eased, the guilt feelings rise and batter the parents.

The parent may thus feel guilty because of his negative sensations toward the child. He may also be overcome with guilt feelings because of the traits his child displays.

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"She can't seem to pass a math course. I guess she inherited her lack from me."

"He is so shy that he cannot walk into a house and say hello to his host. I know what it's like. I found meeting people painful when I was his age." "That long nose of hers makes her self-conscious. I should know. It's just like mine."

And so it goes. Parents worry about what they have done—or for what they have not done.

The child with obvious defects may well not invite as many guilt feelings as the one who begins life robust and who has emotional problems later. The boy who is not attaining scholastically may merit little patience from a teacher; the man who manifests neurotic traits or undependability may elicit little understanding from an employer. Sensitive parents are often beset with guilt feelings when anything goes wrong in the lives of their children. Such reactions are unfortunate because causal factors are so complex that parents should not be privileged to blame themselves.

Guilt Feelings

If such feelings of guilt are frequent companions of parents of normal children, what must they be for the parents whose child is mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed?

"A parent who is confronted with the tragedy of having a retarded child suffers deeply and enters a period of mourning and grief accompanied by emotional isolation and loneliness," says Arthur Mandelbaum, chief social worker for the Menninger Foundation ("Group Processes with Parents of Retarded Children," a paper from the Foundation). The statement holds true for a parent of any child who has problems, either physically or emotionally. It also carries for the parents whose child starts out with great promise but for one of many reasons develops some kind of difficulty.

Although ancient concepts of destroying defective children may have given way to provision of humane services for them, a residue of rejection remains. Mr.

Mandelbaum says, "Such feelings, rooted in our past culture, militate against acceptance of the present-day humane philosophy and produce inner conflict, guilt, and bitterness. These feelings must be recognized and understood if help is to be given to the child and his parents" (in an article with Mary Ella Wheeler, "The Meaning of a Defective Child to Parents," *Social Casework*, July, 1960).

As the parent of a brain-injured child, Richard S. Lewis says, "Feelings of guilt and inadequacy are some of the detours parents must learn to avoid in dealing with the management problem. When such feelings exist in the parents, they are inevitably transmitted to the child, feeding his own feelings of insecurity and anxiety as he grows up in a world which to him appears insecure, confused, or even hostile." (*The Other Child*, Grune and Stratton).

The sense of impotence and guilt about a child can often wreak havoc upon the marital relationship itself. Suppose one parent wants to place the child in an institution and the other parent opposes the placement. The "placement" parent is likely to feel guilty, the other accusatory. Thus the conflict may go on spreading, like slow-acting poison, through the stream of the entire marriage relationship.

Marital conflict may also come through a sense of misplaced martyrdom. The mother who believes that somehow she caused the child's defect may undertake the entire burden of his care. When she is entirely absorbed in the child, the father retreats. Then, in the spiraling fashion of deteriorating relationships, the mother begins to resent the father's withdrawal and indifference.

Or, even when the guilt may not split the marriage

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partners, it may be compounded by the feelings which both parents carry with them. Both of them may have some subtle feeling that they are to blame for the child's deviance. Old wives' tales may return to haunt them. Perhaps they are being punished because they did not really want a child. Or the defect may have evolved from a trip the mother took or some special work she did. Or some youthful escapade of the father's may torture him. Whatever the rationale, the parents are likely to look at the problem as one which they have caused.

The wish for the death of a disturbed child may produce enormous guilt feelings in a parent. Yet all parents of such children have that wish at some time.

Perhaps parents of children with obvious problems would not react so guiltily to such emotions if they recognized that aggressive wishes toward persons one loves are natural. All persons carry the double spectrum of love and hate toward persons close to them. All parents, at times, have hostile sensations concerning their children. The matter, again, is one of degree.

Universal, also, with parents of deviant children are the feelings of jealousy toward friends who have normal children and the wish that such a tragedy might hit others. Ashamed of having such feelings, parents then react with inward guilt.

Guilt itself is unproductive and unrewarding, a stagnant river filled with the refuse of self-pity and decay. But it can be turned into an active stream, harnessing energy for productivity. How?

Rational Guilt

One way is to make use of rational guilt. Utilize it. Part of man's humanity is the willingness to act against his guilt feelings in productive ways. The question is not "How much guilt does a person feel?" But rather "How does he use his guilt?"

Many parents of children with problems find that the first step toward action is through joining a suitable group. Some of these are the National Society for Crippled Children, the National Association of Emotionally Disturbed Children, the National Association for Retarded Children and the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities. Local chapters exist in many communities, and information is available through national offices or local health departments. This activity forms one positive method of sublimating guilty feelings and harnessing them into productive means. The simple act of sharing a problem, of recognizing that others

have similar (and sometimes greater) difficulties, can be strength-giving and can aid in gaining of perspective.

Good facilities have been built, special classes have been maintained, legislation has been passed, courses have been instituted—all through the efforts of parents who banded together to do something constructive for their children. The history of the majority of programs for the mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, and children with learning disabilities reflects the impetus given by parents who felt the pain of their own problem and the larger pain of the problems facing others.

Another step toward the handling of guilt can come through obtaining professional help, either singly or through group process. There is nothing shameful in one's inability to handle feelings. The only pity lies in not trying to find resources which can aid.

Guilt can be harnessed also by seeing that the child receives the best possible medical care, including diagnosis and adjunctive therapies. In addition, parents can learn what home training and treatment are needed and can carry them out conscientiously.

Whole Persons

In conjunction with all of these steps, parents can ease their sense of guilt by remaining whole persons even while caring for the child with problems. Sacrificial tendencies, over-attention to the child, neglect of all other aspects of living—these may serve neurotic needs of a person, but they do not lead to productive living. The child himself will be able to develop to his own best capabilities in an atmosphere of calmness and contentment.

Marriages may sometimes be cemented by diversity. Instead of dividing families, the child may often serve as a welding force. The very magnitude of the problem of giving care to a child with special needs can serve to elevate parents' thinking away from trivial distractions. They can learn to share their feelings with one another, to rely on each other for support and sustenance, to seek together new ways of making life meaningful.

Religious faith and conviction can ease hurt and diminish pain. Guilt and fear may dissipate in the sunlight of religious belief. As the parents of children with problems are able to work through their grief and their guilt and to look for goals outside themselves, they can return from their self-imposed exile into a world of human beings productive and concerned about all humanity. □