

My Child's Brain Injury: Coping with Guilt

Vicki L. Schmall, Ph.D

Many parents feel they could have done something to prevent their child's injury. Some even feel the brain injury is punishment for some previous misdeed. Many times, guilt is linked to the expectation that we as parents should be able to keep our children from harm. But sometimes bad things just happen. They are out of our control.

All parents feel guilty from time to time. It's normal. But excessive guilt can eat away at your self-esteem and even get in the way of being an effective advocate for your child. Acting out of guilt won't make you feel any less guilty. Instead, you can end up feeling resentful, which brings a whole different set of difficulties.

Some people compensate for guilt by trying to do more now to make up for it. They become "human doings" instead of "human beings." Other people deal with guilt by punishing themselves, depriving themselves of things that give them joy. In either case, this can lead to an imbalance between what you think you "should do" and what you are actually doing. To keep from getting bogged down or overwhelmed by guilt, try these strategies that have worked for other parents:

- **Try to eliminate "should" from your vocabulary.** You might try replacing it with "I would like to..." or "I'll try to..." Challenge the idea that a parent "should be able to keep a child free from all harm." Although a parent's role is to protect, no parent's abilities are perfect.
- **Apologize when it is appropriate.** The only time guilt is appropriate is if, in fact, you did something you regret. The best antidote for that kind of guilt is to make amends and apologize. Make sure, however, that you're not apologizing for things that are beyond your control. You are only one person, without superpowers. You are doing the best you can under your current circumstances.
- **Don't let other people push your "guilt button."** All parents feel a normal degree of guilt. ("I spend too much time at work and not enough at home." "I buy too many things for my child." "I don't buy enough."). Sometimes, children and others close to us can work our weak spots. If you feel guilty about your child's injury, you are particularly vulnerable. Remind yourself that it's healthy to set boundaries. Agreeing to do things you will later regret isn't healthy and it can make you resentful. It's okay to say "no."
- **Look at what you've already accomplished.** Chances are you have already done many things to help your child. The next time you feel guilty, try to give "equal time" to acknowledging all the good things you do. You may be surprised to discover that it's really quite a lot.
- **Face it, trace it, and erase it.** It's important to acknowledge whatever part you may have had in your child's injury. It's equally important to forgive yourself. Acknowledging your role, rather than repressing or denying it, will allow you to move on and support your child better. Carrying guilt around prevents you from being a good advocate. Letting go doesn't mean you don't care. In fact, it's just the opposite. Letting go clears the way for more positive feelings, like joy and serenity, which open the heart for truly genuine expressions of care.
- **Break the "blame habit."** If it is easy for you to feel guilty, you may have a history of frequently taking responsibility or blame for things. In general, taking responsibility is a good thing. But it is possible to take responsibility inappropriately, to assume that you are to blame, even when

things happen that are out of your control. This outlook is not healthy for you, for your child, or for other people around you.

- **Talk with a counselor or clergy.** Living with a child with a brain injury can be extremely challenging. If you don't talk to anyone else about the situation, you are likely to lose objectivity. It's easy to get caught in your web of emotions. Talking with a counselor, rabbi, or minister can bring a fresh, unbiased look at the situation. Someone who does not have a history with your child can often help you sort out a more balanced view of your feelings.
- **Develop a new perspective.** Sometimes we feel guilty because we have feelings we wish we didn't have. You may want to feel loving toward your child all the time, but for any number of reasons, you find yourself being irritated or critical instead. Your child may have difficult behaviors and personality changes that are difficult to manage. This can be trying, but finding a new interpretation for your child's actions can help. For example, instead of worrying how you are going to solve your child's problem, it can be more productive to acknowledge that your child needs attention and this is just a way of asking for it. A new perspective on your circumstances can lead you to new, less stressful ways of responding.
- **Focus on what you can do now to help your child.** What new lessons will you and your family learn from this experience?

Additional resource:

Wade, Shari L. , and Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. 2002. *Putting the Pieces Together: An Online Intervention for Pediatric Brain Injury*. Materials adapted from study.

This article was downloaded from www.brainline.org on 9/12/19