

Dealing with Parental Guilt



Feeling guilty once in a while comes with being a parent. Sometimes guilty feelings lead to learning experiences that make you a better parent. Other times, guilty feelings result in unhealthy parenting practices. Here are some common “guilt trips” along with some tips for using the experiences to become a more effective parent.

Guilt trip: I don’t spend enough time with my child.

- Change what you can. Some aspects of your time—such as work schedules—may be hard to change. Make the most of the time you do have with your child. Schedule meal times, game times, reading together, and other important family times first. Other activities—children’s sports, art, or music classes—can be fit into the time that’s left.
- Limit the use of television, computers, and video games at home.
- Keep in mind that taking time for your own emotional or physical health—exercising or seeing a movie with your spouse or a friend—helps you to be a better parent.

Guilt trip: I lose my temper too often with my child.

- Be sure your expectations for your child are reasonable. Very young children are not good at waiting for parents to finish long phone calls. They struggle to ignore candy in the checkout line in a food store.
- Set limits simply, calmly, and firmly. Point out what you want your child to do instead: “Don’t pull the dog’s tail. Pat him gently on his head instead.”
- Be sure your interactions with your child are more positive than negative. If you feel you spend most of your time reminding your child how to behave appropriately, find some other activities that don’t lead to behavior problems.

Guilt trip: I can’t give my child as much as other children have.

- Remember that your child’s happiness is not determined by fancy toys or expensive vacations. In fact, your child’s well-being is largely determined by relationships with important people—parents, siblings, other relatives, close friends, and teachers.
- Help your child deepen his relationships with others by scheduling time when your family can be together and children can play with friends. These relationships will enrich your child far more than anything you can buy.

Guilt trip: I worry about doing the wrong thing.

- Keep in mind that none of us went to school to learn how to parent. Each of us is influenced by the way we were raised. It is natural to worry about decisions we make as parents when our children are young.
- Consult others you trust when you are uncertain what action to take with your child. Talk to your spouse, your own parents, a close friend, or a parenting “expert.”
- Act on your best judgment. Remember that parents need to set reasonable limits so children learn how to get along in the world.

 **For related Web resources, see “Dealing with Parental Guilt” at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.**

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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