

# mummy guilt

By Miriam McCaleb\*

How many times have you berated yourself since becoming a parent? Guilt is often a well-known feeling once you become a parent. Miriam McCaleb explains how we can accept that good is 'good enough'.

May I tell you a little story? About 10 years ago, when my best friend and I were new mothers, we were out for a walk. We had the conditions you'd expect on an autumnal day on the Canterbury coast: a bracing easterly and a dazzling sunny sky. Our babies were fed and warm, snuggled in their modern pushchairs. We paused, and stared at each other anxiously. "Oh you're good," said my friend. "You've got her covered up with a shade cover. That's important with our harsh sun." I shook my head. "No! I had just been thinking that you had the right idea by having him under that rain cover – the plastic will block that chilly wind."

We couldn't help but laugh at ourselves. And I've chuckled sadly about that interaction many times in the decade since. It's so telling that we were quick to judge ourselves, but neither of us was judging the other ("She really should have her baby under shade ..."). As Sarah Naphthali writes in her beautiful book, *Buddhism for Mothers*: "Most of us wouldn't dream of talking to others as harshly as we berate ourselves." It's also notable that, on that stroller-pushing day, neither of us was noticing our 'success' ("I'm so glad I thought to protect her from the sun"). We only saw what we imagined to be our weakness. Experts, like too many parents, at cataloging our perceived failures and shortcomings.

Do you recognise yourself in that description? Have you ever asked yourself where we get our unquenchable thirst for maternal perfection from? And is there ever a moment where we relax, knowing we're doing the whole parenting thing right?

**Mamas (and Papas) take heart:** research from the child development world tells us very clearly that what children need to thrive is a 'good enough' parent - not a 'perfect' parent. Accepting this can be difficult – and liberating. Repeat it periodically throughout the day if necessary.

The parenting literature is clear that kids are actually better off with a parent who's comfortable with being good enough, than with a parent who's seeking perfection. This is hard to acknowledge when we've spent a lifetime striving for the A+ in everything, but it can be a trip accepting that a B- is actually a superior goal.

**Let me say that again:** children do not need us to be perfect. In fact, there really is no such thing as a perfect parent! The energy we spend chasing our imaginary vision of the perfect mother, would be energy much better spent chasing our kids barefoot around the lawn. A mind busy with the guilt of "doing it wrong" is a mind that's not truly in the present moment. We can't use our hands to cuddle our kids if they're busy wringing in a worried frenzy.

*\*Miriam has been a kindergarten teacher and a university lecturer. These days, she parents full time, blogs upon occasion and does a bit of writing in between. Visit her at [www.baby.geek.nz](http://www.baby.geek.nz)*



## break the cycle

- Begin with an awareness of this habit. And see it as only that – a habit. Start by noticing: if you're feeling guilty, what does it feel like in your body? Are you frowning, tensing your shoulders, or swirling of stomach? And then just breathe a bit, and release those physical symptoms. Relax the muscles of your face. Breathe out a sigh. And look: that guilt-moment has passed too. Uncanny.
- Beware social media. It will always be possible to find someone with a cuter anecdote, a higher-achieving child, or a trimmer post-baby waistline. None of this is the point of parenting. Be really honest with yourself about which family/friendships support your work as a parent (because seeking support and sharing can be great!) and which bring you down.
- Similarly, maintain an awareness for how many interactions with other parents are based around a shared delight in "I'm such a terrible mother ...". This seems to be an especially seductive strategy when chatting with mothers we don't know terribly well, as though running ourselves into the ground is a bonding thing. Resist that temptation. C'mon, talking about the weather is better than that.
- Feeling guilty for losing your cool at your kids? We all do it. Apologise to them. Move on.
- Know the difference between guilt and regret. Regret is the feeling of sadness and remorse for a situation that happened in the past. It's over now. Forgive. Cry. Let go. This can be true for the big stuff of life, and equally for little things, but there is no point in feeling guilty about past decisions. You can regret them, you can learn from them, but you gotta let them go. If you feel stuck in the world of regret, consider unpacking that with a counsellor. Set yourself (and your parenting) free.
- For every guilt-attack, remind yourself of two (three, or five) things you're doing really well.
- Check your internal guru. In the words of Dr Spock (the baby guy, not the Starship Enterprise dude): "Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do." This is a caution, too, about the addictive practise of reading parenting books, and scouring the online forums. There can be a fine line between seeking parenting strategies and winding oneself into an anxious knot because so much advice is utterly contradictory! Remember that what works for someone else's family might not work best for yours. Again: trust yourself.
- Practise smiling. Seriously! Just flex those muscles upward. The real stuff of family life is messy, and magnificent. It is inconvenient, and incredible. Every minute you spend worrying about what could be better is a minute you're not spending wading into the delicious chaos right in front of you. Today won't come again.