

WORKING PARENT GUILT

“Guilt is an unhappy feeling that you have because you have done something wrong or think that you have done something wrong.”¹ Many working parents experience feelings of guilt as a result of their dual role as parents and workers. Here we will explore why working parents may experience guilt and propose some tips on how ‘working parent guilt’ can be reduced and managed. We also outline the results of research which finds that there is no negative impact on children as a result of their parents working. Should you wish to discuss any concerns you have in relation to this or any other issue please contact the Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS) by phone at [0761000030](tel:0761000030) or e-mail cseas@per.gov.ie. For individual Employee Assistance Officer’s details, click on the ‘meet the team’ photo on our website www.cseas.per.gov.ie.



Why do working parents experience feelings of guilt?

Societal expectations:

In the past, many grew up in families where one parent (usually the mother) stayed at home with the children, while the other parent was the breadwinner. This has come to be seen as the ‘ideal’ as evidenced in a 2014 study² which revealed that a majority of people believe that it is better for children if there is a parent at home full-time.

Reality:

This view tends to ignore the fact that in the past many women worked outside the home e.g. helping out on family farms or in family businesses. Furthermore, statistics from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) indicate that this ‘ideal’ situation is not reflected in modern society. While the participation rates for women in the workforce decline following the birth of their children, figures from the CSO in 2016³ indicate that almost 70% of women with children were engaged in employment. This figure jumps to over 90% in the case of fathers.

Facts:

Study into the impact on children of working parents has been limited. However research conducted to date, tends to demonstrate that overall there are no adverse consequences to children’s happiness, mental health or academic progress as a result of their parents working. Instead, some benefits were identified. One longitudinal study showed that daughters of working mothers earn higher salaries and are more likely to be employed in supervisory roles. Their sons are more likely to help care for family members and spend time doing household chores. Other benefits include the fact that children learn to be self-sufficient and adaptable, as well as being provided with an opportunity to bond with other adults and caregivers.

¹ www.collinsdictionary.com

² www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/04/08/chapter-4-public-views-on-staying-at-home-vs-working/

³ www.cso.ie

Research shows that the amount of time that parents spend at work does not negatively impact their children. Instead children's emotional health is higher when parents believe that family should come first regardless of the amount of hours they spent at work. Children are better off when parents care about or are satisfied in their jobs - so it's ok to enjoy being a working parent (Milke et al, 2015) and (McGinn et al, 2019).

How to manage working parent guilt:

Quality Time:

It may be surprising to know that we spend more time with our children nowadays than parents did in the 1960s. A longitudinal study across 11 countries found that between 1965 and 2012, the amount of time that parents actually spent with their children increased (Dotti Sani and Treas, 2016).

Research shows that it is not the amount of time that you spend with your children that is important but the quality of that time. During this time, it is important that parents are 'present' with their children. Some ways to improve the quality of your time with your children can include the following:



- Don't be distracted by your electronic devices. Perhaps you could leave your phone in another room?
- It's ok to let things slide such as cleaning so that you can spend more time with your child
- To engage your child, make statements (e.g. "oh, you are playing with the lego") instead of asking questions. This helps to keep both of you focused



- If you have more than one child, spend time with them individually. Studies have shown that just 8 minutes a day, one-to-one with your child, can significantly increase their self-esteem and confidence levels
- Choose how you spend your time wisely e.g. spending ten minutes more with your child in the morning even if it means working ten minutes later in the evening
- If you wish to spend more time with your child and it is possible, why not:
 - take an annual leave or flexi day
 - finish work early sometimes
 - have a 'chore free' day at the weekend

Tips to make the most efficient use of your time:

Time Management skills:

- Make to-do lists to help you prioritise and remember everything
- Set reminders

If possible get help with:

- Cleaning – you can even involve your children in simple age appropriate household chores
- Grocery delivery
- Childcare
- Swapping babysitting duties with family/friends

Conflicts/Trade off:

At times, as a parent you will be faced with conflicting needs in relation to your child and a work/personal commitment. You may feel guilty for choosing the work or personal commitment. To challenge this, question if you have done something wrong? Consider what was your top priority in that moment? Accept that sometimes your career or your personal needs, must come first. To help, replace 'I should do X' with 'I could do X but on this occasion it is important for me to do Y and that is ok.'



There will be trade-offs and you will miss out on events from time to time. It's ok to feel sad about this. However, it provides an opportunity for others to be involved in your child's life, such as a grandparent. Perhaps they can take photos or videos and you can watch them later with your child.

Communication tips for managing conflicts between work and family:

If you have to choose between work and family commitments, rather than saying you can't do something, frame your priorities. Outline your next steps, commitment and enthusiasm. For example, "I cannot attend the school fair on this occasion due to a work meeting, however, it is important for me to be involved with the parents committee so count me in for the bake sale next month."

Guilt Trips:

Where possible avoid those who cause you guilt for being a working parent. If this is not possible remember:

- They are speaking from their *own* experience
- You have made the best decision based on the needs of YOUR family
- Believe in yourself
- Don't waste your energy trying to change them
- Walk away if you need to
- If it is helpful, develop a working parent anti-guilt motto e.g. I make a valuable contribution to both my family and my profession

Challenging Times:

Transitions such as returning to work after maternity leave or children starting school can be challenging for many working parents. To make it easier, rehearse and plan as best you can. Organise what you can ahead of time.

Financial Benefits of Working:

- Your family is financially better off
- You are being a role model for your children for their future working life
- You are building your pension
- You've invested in your career to date – consider the cost of walking away

Self-care



It is important for you to have time to yourself. Schedule at least 10 minutes per day to do something you enjoy. It is important for your children to see that your personal interests matter and it sets a good example for them. It is also important for your own mental health and self-esteem to have some time to yourself. Build some positives into your routine – have some treats!

Remember:

There is no such thing as the perfect parent. You are your own toughest critic. Be willing to go with the flow. Rather than aiming for perfection, lower your bar to 'good enough.' You can't do it all. You can only do your best. Enjoy your children. You didn't have them so that you would spend your life feeling inadequate!

