

Mom Guilt

I didn't breastfeed my son long enough. I let my one year old watch TV so I can shower. My kids subsist on macaroni and cheese and graham crackers. Our three year old still sleeps in bed with us. I used the cry it out method to get my daughter to sleep at night.

Welcome to the world of "Mom guilt." If you're a mother, you probably have both heard of and experienced this particular form of culpability. It refers to the blame a mother (or any parent) places on herself about the choices she's made and the . It could be a small thing like a skinned knee; "I shouldn't have let him ride his bike without kneepads!" Or perhaps something with more tragic results. I've thought a lot lately about the guilt two specific mothers must be feeling after their young sons were caught in life-threatening circumstances. Sadly, one incident did result in the tragic death of a two year old boy. This hits awfully close to home for me, and so I've found myself feeling a mix of sadness and compassion for these moms I've never met.

I can relate to the experience of taking my eyes off my child for a moment only to regret it. Just recently, my toddler bolted from me in a busy parking lot, and I was quick to berate myself. He didn't get hurt, but I imagined the worst. "How could I make such a stupid mistake! How could I be so thoughtless, so distracted, so . . . imperfect."

What I've realized, with some help, is that there is something deeper going on here than your typical self-blame. Being a parent is the most intense vulnerability I have ever experienced. The very real fear of losing those most beloved is so paralyzing that most of the time we can't tolerate being aware of it. There is real terror in recognizing that, try as we might, we cannot protect our children from every conceivable danger. Even when we make all the right choices (and who can do that?), the world is not always a safe place. Not being able to unconditionally protect those we love most is perhaps the ultimate form of helplessness.

As parents we all have slip-ups, most of which won't result in anything tragic. And perhaps, when we have those slip-ups, it is easier on the psyche to focus on ourselves, specifically our guilt, than to acknowledge the terrifying reality that we cannot control everything in the world around us. Like us, our children are vulnerable - to germs, and accidents and mean people. But as parents, we want to protect them. Focusing on our own wrongdoing is a way of feeling as if we have some degree of control. "If I'd been paying more attention this wouldn't have happened." Sometimes that might be true. But much of the time circumstances are beyond our control, and that reality just doesn't sit well with Mama Bear. Guilt becomes a way to by-pass powerlessness. Rather than feeling the fear and vulnerability, we blame.

Whatever you're currently guilted yourself about I invite you to let in those feelings of vulnerability instead of focusing on the guilt. It may be difficult to be with this intense form of helplessness. Just let it be. Don't try to change it because that won't work. Try just being curious next time you notice mom guilt. Ask yourself, "what am I afraid of in this circumstance?" And then try to give yourself some well deserved compassion and self-care.