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Parenting and Guilt

Everywhere you look and listen, you will see the signs of guilt used as weapon of parental warfare. You can see the tears and the tantrums of the toddler, the confusion and distraught emotional flailing of the tweens, and the dismissive anger and rolling eyes of the teenager.

A large percentage of these actions by kids can be directly traced to a parenting approach which uses guilt as a behavior manipulator. To understand why guilt can work to temporarily alter behavior but cause undo harm and other negative consequences, we first need to understand a little mix of evolutionary biology and psychology.

Memes

Most of us know what guilt is. Someone makes you feel bad about yourself purposely to try to manipulate you to act differently. Even as stated, I find it amazing that its use is so wide spread. Seriously, does anyone really believe this will work and is healthy? But I digress.

A useful term I have come to understand is meme (see Richard Dawkins). A meme is a postulated unit or element of cultural ideas, symbols or practices, and is transmitted from one mind to another through speech, gestures, rituals, or other imitable phenomena. A meme is a word we can use to explain that children are endowed by evolution with the ability to quickly and effectively pick up on cultural and family norms. This is our evolved way to secure the future of our species.

Put another way, consider a lion cub. They quickly learn to hunt, learn the pecking order of the pride, and learn to spot danger quickly. Some of this is instinct, but these are also learned by watching and playing with adults.

Human children are similar in that they do not inherit their language or religion or approach to life, BUT they do inherit the tools to quickly grasp and integrate themselves into the world in which they grow up. After all, the faster a human can function like an adult, the faster they can safely function in the world and, stated simply, stay alive.

This meme-making ability in children depends heavily on a feedback mechanism, namely the approval or disapproval of the authority figures in a child's life. It is this approval which a lot of parents use as a weapon to punish and manipulate children into doing what they want.

Weapons of Mass Manipulation

Unfortunately, a lot of us grew with guilt used as a weapon on us. We then integrated guilt into our world view and in spite of our logical best intentions, in spite of a hatred of the guilt when we were a child, in spite of the hurt feelings we still remember, there is a strong tendency to use guilt when challenged by your children.

For children, memes were learned well and then placed on the back burner to be yanked from the 'unconscious' when needs. Even from the most self-aware parent, the blame-laden words want to pour out:

- After everything I've done, you treat me like this? (a classic)
- I work and slave and this is the thanks I get. (a typical working parent theme)

- You're going to give me a stroke! (the morbid and rather dark)
- I guess I'm just not a good parent. (down right rotten)

Even the seemingly innocuous “that’s a good boy” judgementalism can be guilt based depending on usage. For instance, there is a qualitative difference between saying “you made Sarah happy when you shared your cookie with her” and saying “good girls share their cookies, don’t you want to share?”

Guilt for Toddlers

At different life stages, guilt will yield different results. For the very young, their little meme-sucking brains are trying to build a framework of their world. We see children go from diapers to rolling over to crawling to walking to talking in a very short time span (with no schooling involved, I might add).

During this time, especially when the so-called ‘terrible twos’ come around, the toddler will begin to not simply accept ‘no’ as a ‘no’. When that happens, the parents who were spanked may start doing that. Those given timeouts will try that. And those who were fed guilt as children, will no doubt start trying it as well.

For a toddler whose young brain is trying SOOOO hard to fit their world, guilt is the height of frustration. Their feelings and thoughts are dismissed and they are being manipulated, but they have no clue how to respond nor can they understand why they are so angry. Enter the tantrum.

Guilt for Tweeners

Between the ages of 6 and 13 or so, children quickly wise up. On the young side of this range, there is still a lot of confusion. They feel angry but they start to realize what is happening. There are periods of self loathing and sulking, because they are not meeting the expectations of those they love and need most.

The 6 year old hits and acts out against those who are making them feel so bad while the 10 year may threaten to run away. However you slice it, the utility of guilt begins to break down in its ability to temporarily change behavior and instead erects a wall of separation in the relationship.

Guilt for Teens

If a teenager has been fed guilt in sufficient doses, they have probably written their parents off by the age of 14 or 15. They will search for memes elsewhere since they are still meaning seekers, but will be finding them in their peers. Teen friendships can be wonderful, but not as a replacement for a relationship with a nurturing adult.

When someone says to a teen “you’re going to give me a stroke”, they may hear back “I’ll order a casket.” If the teen has put together the nature of guilt, they may sarcastically remark “pack your bags, we’re going on a guilt trip.” If they are thoroughly bought in, they may return your guilt with a “well if you had provided X, I wouldn’t be this way”.

Guilt as a Distraction

Guilt may change a little behavior temporarily in the very young, but at what cost. Relationships and trust are thrown into an ash heap of bad feeling which can take years to try to crawl out from under.

When you use guilt, it creates confusion in the mind of the child. This confusion leads to an extremely unfocused mind which, ironically, can lead to the exact opposite of the behavior you may want from your child.

For instance, let's take our parent who is a potential stroke victim. A very young child may hear this as a literal possibility, so while they are supposed to be learning to spell d-o-g, they are worrying about their parent's impending death. For a child, words are often simply their literal meaning.

If you doubt the truth of this example, imagine a time in your life where your job was stressful and a loved one was ill and a tree just fell on your house. Are you thinking clearly about any one of them? Only with great effort, and you are an adult.

For a meme machine child, the importance of guilt items can be a monstrous distraction and detach them from the ability to think about anything else. Sometimes when a parent guilties about 'good behavior', the child is so worried about the guilt that they can't concentrate on the behavior. (It should be noted that this is the same reason punishment does not work – the focus becomes the punishment or punisher, versus the behavior.)

The House that Guilt Built

Mr. and Mrs. Stroke-victim, tear down that wall. The house built of guilt has no place in a relationship built on trust, love and understanding. That straw façade can be blown away and replaced with a strong home made from bricks of reason.

When you use guilt, you actually hamstring the innate process of learning which a child already possesses. For meme machine children, guilt is like putting sand in their gas tank and will bring their natural abilities to a grinding halt.

But let's face it. Guilt is not just something which has a negative effect on children. It is bad form. Would you guilt a friend? A co-worker? It is wrong to mess with someone's mind like this, trying to turn their own moral sense against them.

But be aware. For most, including me, it takes eternal vigilance to not fall back into the memes you grew up with. Your ego will get smacked around and you will feel like a bad person at times. Don't feel too guilty about the past, just change in the present.

Believe it or not, parenting without guilt is possible and your children will thrive without that ball and chain. An added reward is that you will be able to watch your children raise their children without having this same yoke attached to them.