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"Am I a Bad Parent?" How to Let Go of Parenting Guilt

by Janet Lehman, MSW

Countless readers write in to *Empowering Parents* and say, "I'm supposed to know how to make my child behave, but I don't. He's out of control and people blame me for his behavior. I feel guilty and ashamed most of the time, and very alone. It's the worst feeling in the world." The truth is, you're not supposed to know everything about being a parent—it's a skill you have to learn, just like anything else. While there's no one "right way" to parent, there *are* more effective ways to handle your child's behavior.

You're probably not waking up in the morning saying, "I think I'll really mess my kid up today."

Related: [Stop blaming yourself for your child's behavior and take on more parental authority today.](#)

I've worked with some of the toughest, out of control adolescents imaginable and really understand where people are coming from when they say they feel like a "bad parent." As a therapist in residential treatment centers for troubled teens and at-risk youth, part of my job was also working with parents to teach them new skills. The moms and dads I met were beaten down and guilt-ridden by the time their kids arrived at the residential center. The vast majority had really tried to do their best as parents, but they were up against difficult odds with their kids—including behavior disorders, mood problems and other stressors in the home. It was extremely difficult for them to dig out of the hole of blame, shame and guilt, because their kids had such a long history of acting-out behavior. But over time, these parents learned to stop taking their children's behavior personally, and to parent more effectively by using techniques that stressed responsibility and accountability. So remember, no matter what has gone on before or what your child is like now, it's never too late for them to change.

If you have an [acting-out child](#), it's common to feel a chronic sense of shame over his behavior, or like you've "failed" as a parent. The important thing to understand is that these feelings don't help

anyone; they won't help you, and they won't help your child. Questions about who's to blame don't really matter when parents are working to become more effective. The real question is, what can you do differently to help your child change his behavior? After all, it's not about whose fault it is—it's about who is willing to take responsibility.

I understand that feeling judged and blamed by others is uncomfortable and upsetting. And perhaps you *are* being judged by others, but keep reminding yourself that they haven't walked in your shoes. Even if you're being blamed, you're still trying to do your very best. You're probably not waking up in the morning saying, "I think I'll really mess my kid up today." So give yourself a break from blame and guilt, and focus instead on what you can do to change the situation.

When You Take on Blame for Your Child's Behavior

When your child acts out or misbehaves, it can become a habit to say things to yourself like, "It's my fault he lies—I spoiled him and allowed him to get away with too much when he was younger. It's my fault he's rude to his grandparents—I wasn't able to teach him good manners. It's my fault his grades are bad—I should have worked harder with him every night. It's my fault he stays out past curfew—I allowed him too much freedom after my divorce because I felt guilty about breaking up the family. While it's common to fall into the trap of feeling guilty, it won't get you—or your child—anywhere. It's important to understand that when you blame yourself, you're taking on your child's behavior—and you're not helping him take responsibility. This is the opposite of what you want, because your child will just learn that he doesn't need to be accountable for his actions.

[Related: Hold your child accountable by using effective consequences.](#)

Why do we get into these patterns with our kids? To put it simply, it's painful to see our children struggle. Think of it this way: have you ever picked up your child's room even though he was supposed to clean it? You probably told yourself, "It'll be easier if I just do it myself." In the same way, it can be easier to take on our kids' mistakes than to hold them responsible. But just as you faced your own difficulties growing up and learned how to take responsibility, so will your child need to learn those same lessons. Along the way, he'll face some challenges and disappointments. If he's not allowed to face those difficulties, he'll never develop into an adult who's able to take responsibility and deal with life's ups and downs; he'll always be looking for someone else to take on his problems—or take the blame for his actions.

Here's an example from my own life. I remember a time when our son was having difficulties in school. His teacher called about his behavior and my first reaction was to get angry and defensive and blame myself. But my husband [James](#) was so clear when he said, "This is not about you, Janet—it's about our son." This was helpful in prompting me to change and not take what was happening personally. I needed to remove myself from the picture and focus on my child and what he needed.

If you're enabling your child by blaming other people—or yourself—you need to take a step back and really ask, "Is this a pattern that's developed?" When you start looking at patterns of behavior in a

non-blaming way, you'll be able to help your child take responsibility *and* change that behavior. In order to do this, you have to be strong and not buy all the excuses your child may give you. Don't let him try to put the blame on you by saying things like, "You made me mad so I kicked the wall." Or "You took my cell phone away so I went out to meet my friends without telling you."

[Related: Is your child verbally abusive?](#)

If you have a child who's blaming others, you might start by having him write down what happened. (If possible, try to find out what happened yourself and have the goods on the situation by doing a little investigative work with the people involved.) What you want is to get your child to a place where he can be as objective as possible about what happened. Ask, "What was your responsibility and what were other people's responsibilities in this situation?" This question is powerful to help him learn about his role in what happened and how to change. You might even write down the facts yourself. Be as objective as possible and don't put yourself—or your feelings of guilt—into the equation. List the facts and think about them almost as a neutral party. This will help you to look at things with a clearer lens.

When Others Blame You

Does this sound familiar? You're out somewhere in your neighborhood and your child starts acting out. Maybe he yells at you or calls you a foul name. Somebody sends you a blaming look or makes a comment about your child being out of control, and you immediately feel guilty. People will put that blame and shame on you, but you don't have to accept it. When you finally become empowered as a parent, you'll realize that nobody walks in your shoes. Those people who judge you don't have a clue, because you really are doing your best every day. Here's something that's helpful to repeat to yourself: "No one understands unless they've walked in my shoes. I'm doing my best, and other people won't always see or appreciate that." Eventually, you'll be able to change those tapes that are playing in your head that say you're doing a bad job or that you're a failure as a parent. Instead, you'll be able to say honestly, "I tried my best today, and we made it to bedtime without a fight."

Old Habits Die Hard: When You Catch Yourself Taking on Blame

What should you do when you're able to actually catch yourself in the moment feeling guilty or taking on blame for your child? First of all, congratulate yourself for being aware of what's happening. The first real step toward change on your part is that awareness of what you're doing. Any time you can catch yourself and count to five, you're probably going to do something different than your first impulse. If you can, take a moment and write down the facts. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. **What's the situation? What actually happened?**
2. **What's my first inclination based on those findings?**
3. **What could I do to be more effective?**

It's really all about gaining objectivity and then, as James said, taking yourself out of the picture. Step back physically and take a timeout if you need to. And keep telling yourself, "This is not about me, it's about my child."

"I feel so alone."

Often families of [oppositional, defiant, or acting-out kids](#) become very withdrawn and start to pull away from other people. While it can protect parents and families from further outside shame and blame, it does nothing to improve the internal feelings the parents have about their own blame and their own failure. In other words, this isolation really magnifies their feelings of failure.

[Related: Does your child's acting out behavior make you feel alone?](#)

When you reach out to others, it helps to reduce or remove blame and failure. You'll get a better perspective and realize you're not alone and that there are others who have similar problems. None of us knew how to parent when we had our children; we all learn as we go. The bottom line is that feeling blamed and feeling guilty prevents us from taking action; it keeps us stuck and feeling defeated. It becomes the lens we see things through, rather than through a clearer lens that focuses on behavioral change.

I recommend that you reach out to people who may also be going through some of the same struggles as you are. Keep reading *Empowering Parents*; join our [Facebook community](#). It's amazingly helpful, because you'll see other parents who are having the exact same problems that you're having with your child—and chances are you won't blame or judge them. When you see yourself reflected in another person—who's also trying their best to raise their child—you'll have a much healthier sense of yourself.

Blame and guilt produce a lot of wasted energy and wasted feelings—the challenge is to get beyond these emotions. Your guilt usually has nothing to do with what's going on with your child: his behavior can very possibly be beyond your control. You may really need some additional help, like [The Total Transformation program](#) or counseling, to implement change. The bottom line is that instead of feeling guilty or blaming yourself, what you need to do is move forward and change what you're doing now