

## Gusseted by Guilt

Gusseted by guilt. Hedged in by the hairshirt. Racked with remorse.

Every conversation with a young parent invariably leads to one of the “I shoulds:” *“I know I should give up my job and stay home, but I really love what I do.” “I know I shouldn’t let him watch television, but it’s the only way I can get anything done.” “I know I should be teaching her to (like vegetables, write her name, share her toys—fill in the blank), but....”*

What is it about being a parent that opens the gate to guilt? Many parents find themselves frustrated because, like an overwhelmed toddler, they really want two experiences at the same time. They can hardly enjoy the satisfactions of career or family for worrying about what they are failing to achieve in either arena.

If you’re working, you should be leading the playgroup. If you’re at home, you should be contributing to the family income. If you’re spending time with your spouse, you should be helping with homework. If you’re parenting, you’re neglecting your spouse. If you play, you should be doing laundry. If you’re doing laundry, you should be reading to your children.

Parents who are able to stay home with their children may feel the heaviest brunt because, after all, they should certainly be able to be perfect parents if they have 24 hours each day to do it. On call all the time, stay-at-home parents often don’t take time for lunch and never get a coffee break. The image of the beleaguered soccer mom is enough to send some mothers scurrying back to work.

The good news is that this pressure is borne out of society’s understanding that children carry their childhoods with them forever. Thoughtful parents realize the lifelong importance of their encounters with their children.

The bad news is that many parents become slaves to this notion, unable to relax if their child is not engaged in pleasant, stimulating activity all day long. This scenario results in demanding children and exhausted parents.

The best news of all is that balance seems to be the answer. Children benefit by our engagement with them, and they also benefit by periods of being left to entertain themselves. Sharing a story together with your child and then turning away to see to other tasks fulfills her need for attention without sacrificing her own resourcefulness.

This natural rhythm of interaction with parents and then time for independence develops in children two amazing gifts: trust that others can be counted on for help and love, and a sense of their own competence to manage their lives. Knowing that they are giving their child such a bountiful legacy should grant parents peace—a well-earned reprieve from the “shoulds.”