

# Strategies for Reducing Guilt Among Working Mothers

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"Guilt among women is bacteria gone wild, one that eats away their pleasure and ruins their lives"  
(Holcomb, 1998, p. 322).

Once again Molly feels disheveled and guilty as she walks her three-year-old son, Sam, into the preschool building on Monday morning. She gives Sam a big hug and says, "I'm so sorry Mommy has to work today. I will come back to get you as soon as I can." Sam clings to her, feeling his mother's sense of insecurity is a reason to be scared. Molly inadvertently sends strong messages to her child: that their family is not proud of Molly's value as a worker and financial provider and that day care is not a good place to spend the day.

Kate, on the other hand, chatters with her four-year-old daughter, Sarah, while they drive to preschool. They walk into the preschool room with energy and excitement, talking about the weekly theme, "The Ocean", and Kate's work as a physical therapist. Kate gives her daughter the usual farewell hug and kiss on the cheeks with a playful grin. She says, "Mommy is so proud of all the work you do at preschool. I'm going to leave to go help people who need me today at my work. Your job is to have a fun day at preschool learning new things. Tonight, we'll do that art project we talked about."

*She leaves the room with a confident smile while Sarah runs to play with her friends. What makes the transition from home to school easier for Kate and Sarah is that they have established a consistent parting ritual. Kate also gives important messages to her child: that their family is proud of Kate's value as a worker and financial provider and that Sarah's preschool is an exciting and wonderful place to be.*

Many working mothers can relate to feeling guilty about taking their young children to day care and preschool. They often feel they have committed an offense when they leave their children at the start of another workday. Today's working mothers frequently feel guilty about utilizing childcare because of hurtful and inaccurate messages from popular culture, religion, teachers, and even friends. In *Not Guilty: The Good News About Working Mothers*, Betty Holcomb (1998) writes, "it's easy to tap the collective discomfort Americans feel about day care. The anxiety sits at the center of public and private conversations, shadowing working moms every day" (p. 204). Although there are numerous reports that day care is a positive experience for young children, childcare still carries a strong social stigma. Questions lurk in the minds of working parents regarding the

effects of day care on young children. Guilt arises from these questions and other uncertainties that many parents have about utilizing childcare.

Unfortunately, social anxiety and guilt about day care frequently leads to self-doubt among working mothers and is transferred to their children. It is understandable for mothers to feel self-doubt and anxiety when the day care's quality is poor, but they often feel a great deal of guilt even when they describe their child's day care personnel as "friendly, a part of our family, trustworthy, and knowledgeable about child development." In addition, day care staff and preschool teachers often experience some of the same feelings about working mothers and day care which puts them in an awkward position with working parents. This paper will provide strategies for childcare staff to increase mothers' knowledge about this issue and decrease their negative feelings about it.

## How Today's Mothers Feel Guilty About Working

Women's guilty experiences are a normal occurrence considering the context in which many women live and work. Mothers often pass this guilt and anxiety to their children. Prominent research regarding day care has shown that guilty and anxious messages, not daycare, are

damaging for a child's development. In fact, a mother's attitudes about working and day care have a tremendous influence on her child's day care experience. A mother who feels her employment status and day care use is positive is more likely to pass messages of pride and enthusiasm along to her child. Because children are sensitive to the feelings of their parents, these messages make a large difference in children's perceptions of day care as an exciting, learning environment or a second-class environment for missing mom (Crockenberg & Litman, 1991; Hock & DeMeis, 1990; Stuckey, McGhee, & Bell, 1982). However, disseminating messages of pride and enthusiasm instead of fear and anxiety can be a difficult feat for many of today's working moms who do not know the research in this area and are only aware of the negative political propaganda in the area of working moms and daycare.

Many mothers feel ambivalent about working, which keeps them from feeling entirely positive and enthusiastic about their careers and use of day care. For example, Lisa, who dearly loves being a mother, may secretly also enjoy being employed, but guilt may keep her from sharing this news with others (including her child) for fear they will think she is selfish or too career-oriented. Moira, on the other hand, wants to be a stay-at-home mom. However, financial circumstances require her to work, so she remains in a guilty, unhappy bind. Because of societal confusion about women's changing societal roles, the media tends to over-report negative findings about day care and under-report or misreport positive findings. Therefore, mothers are not always getting all of the information they need to make informed choices for their own well-being

and the well-being of their children. Mothers may feel guilty about using day care even when they *want* to work or *need* to work.

What Lisa and Moira do not know is that day care research is strikingly positive, especially regarding children placed in quality day care settings (Andersson, 1989; Burchinal, Lee & Ramey, 1989; Hoffman, 1989; Howes, 1990; Kagan, 1984; Lamb et al., 1988). Hoffman (1989) concluded that maternal employment is unlikely to have detrimental effects upon a child's well being. In fact, children benefit when their mothers are working because most compensate for their absences by being especially sensitive and responsive caregivers when they are home. Many studies have demonstrated that children benefit in many ways when their mothers work (Hoffman, 1980, 1989; Parcel & Mengahan, 1990). The most obvious benefit is economic security. In fact, about 60% of working mothers are married to men who earn less than \$15,000 per year (Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, 1995). Hoffman (1989) found that children with working mothers tend to be more independent and have more flexible attitudes about gender roles. Further, a mother's job complexity has been associated with verbal intelligence (Parcel & Menaghan, 1990) and improved home environment (Menaghan & Parcel, 1991).

Parents also benefit from dual-earner roles and the use of quality day care. Marshall and Barnett (1993) found that many dual-earner couples experience numerous gains from combining work and family. Gottman and Carrere (1994) suggest that marital satisfaction is much higher among couples who are able to maintain an egalitarian arrangement for bread-win-

ning, housework, and parenting. Barnett and Rivers (1996) state that dual-earners work balanced schedules, share child raising, and put family first.

Although it is true that working women experience stress due to role conflict, they also benefit from combining family and work roles. It is likely that this also holds true for men in dual-earner households. Men benefit from having increased responsibility for and involvement with the parenting role and not having sole responsibility for the bread-winning role (Zimmerman & Haddock, 1999).

#### Societal Messages That Intensify Working Mothers' Guilt

According to Holcomb (1998), women's inclination to feel guilty and worried is "aided and abetted by the society around them, from coworkers to teachers to pediatricians to relatives" (p. 324). Subtle and not so subtle messages abound regarding a woman's place in society. Mothers tend to hear overwhelming messages that they are not good enough. Examples of comments that might encourage guilt, fear, and self-doubt among working mothers include:

- A working mother hears comments by politicians, her parents, and her church minister that the "downfall of our society comes from women deserting their children to enter the workforce."

- A woman who has a day care in her home says to a mother seeking her services that she decided to stay home and direct a day care while her children were young because she would never let another woman raise her children.

- A pediatrician asks a working mother which day care her daughter goes to, inquiring how many hours a week her child spends in a child-care, and acting as expert on

whether the day care is good enough.

- A college professor states that children should not be out of the care of their "mother" for more than twenty hours per week. Several mothers who work thirty to forty hours per week are in the class.

- A relative of a working mother defends her choice to go to work part-time with the words, "No mother wants to work and leave her children with someone else unless she has to."

- A commercial of a woman using a cell phone and her daughter asks to be a client for the day (this is not reality for most working women who are available and loving mothers).

- The cover of "Time" shows working parents hanging on the hands of a clock with a child looking on as if she has been left out. The research on dual career couples does not support this.

These messages have a detrimental effect upon a working woman's sense of pride, self-esteem, and well being. According to Peters (1996), if this guilt can be reduced, women often experience a greater sense of self-confidence and well being.

### Reducing: Guilt Among Working Mothers

It is a normal developmental process for children to suffer from separation anxiety. They can work through it with love and support from parents and childcare providers. However, separation anxiety of parents is often overlooked (Hock, McBride, & Gnezda, 1989). Recognizing that parents do miss their children and feel anxious about leaving them is important. Mothers need support, education, and guidance to understand why they are experiencing these feelings and what they can do to resolve them.

Refuting the idea that mothers should feel guilty about having a career and interests outside the home, Peters (1996) encourages mothers to seek out and welcome "other mothers" for their children. She argues that our society needs many "other mothers," including involved fathers, educated day care employees, teachers, counselors, grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbors, and friends. Hillary Rodham Clinton (1996) states that "the children are cradled in the family, which is primarily responsible for their passage from infancy to adulthood. But around the family are the larger settings of neighborhood, school, church, workplace, community, culture, economy, society, nation, and world, which affect children directly or through the well-being of their families. Each of us participates in several of these interlocking layers of the village. Each of us, therefore, has the opportunity and responsibility to protect and nurture children" (p. 317). Despite societal myths that mothers should be solely responsible for their children's well-being, more recent trends encourage parents to depend upon a network of friends, relatives, and community members to help raise children. While parents are primarily responsible for their children's care and love, educated day care employees are a vital support system in the networks of many working parents.

Childcare workers have a responsibility and opportunity to provide educational stimulation, safe and creative environments, and loving relationships for children in their care. In addition, they can provide a place where working mothers can "heal their wounds," so to speak, from the negative societal messages about day care and working mothers. A woman who does not receive positive and accurate

information about day care and the benefits of being a working mother can be overcome with guilt that can decrease her sense of personal pride and well-being. On the other hand, a working mother who gains more positive information about day care can enjoy the benefits that a rich work and family life can offer. Therefore, the overall goal of this article is to encourage day care workers and preschool teachers to provide working mothers with an alternative set of values and knowledge about working mothers and day care, to help reduce guilt among working mothers.

### Strategies for Reducing Guilt

An important aspect of being an early childhood staff member is supporting and educating parents. There are many opportunities for staff members to support and educate working mothers. Boykin (1999) states that the first week is often the most difficult for new families. Suggestions for making the first week a more positive experience so that mothers are less likely to feel guilty include:

- Send a welcome letter from the director the week before childcare begins. In this letter specifically list/state recent findings that preschool benefits children.

- Plan an orientation meeting with the parent(s) and child on the first day. Distribute articles to help mothers' transition with reduced guilt.

- Call or e-mail the parent mid-morning to share what the child is doing and offer reassurance when a child or parent is having difficulty separating. Validate the importance of her working.

- Take a polaroid picture of the child happy and engaged in activity on the first day. Send the picture to the parent's work site and include a

list of benefits her child receives from attending preschool.

- Check with parents informally during the first week to see how parents are doing and how their child is adjusting. Reassure mothers about benefits of their working and their child being in preschool.

- Plan a short meeting or phone conversation for Friday to see how the first week went and to see if there is anything else the staff can do to help with adjustment.

- Provide handouts with ideas and resources for fun, play, and quality time after school and on the weekends.

### Providing a Supportive Early Childhood Environment

One of the main goals of childcare employees should be to help mothers create positive attitudes towards childcare. It is advantageous to point out that the family and early childhood program are working as a team to provide the best care for each child. Centers must demonstrate that the childcare environment has a value system that supports working mothers. For example, hang up posters that show both mothers and fathers working, or post fact sheets with topics such as "the good news about working couples." Ideas for providing a supportive environment for working mothers include:

- Educate parents about the difference between guilt and missing their child. Many parents typically miss their children, thinking about good times spent together or reflecting on what their child is doing at a given time. Guilty feelings are typically stronger feelings and are often self-defacing. Parents may feel like they've committed a breach of conduct or violated a law.

- Provide special evening workshops on topics that support and empower working mothers, for

example, how to accomplish co-parenting with a partner or spouse. Some resources that encourage co-parenting and equal division of labor include:

- "The Shared Child," Chapter 5 *Peer Marriage: How Love Between Equals Really Works* by Pepper Schwartz (1994). This chapter discusses the benefits and challenges of shared parenting.

- *Halving it all: How equally shared parenting works* by F. Deutsch (1999) about how dual-earner couples co-parent.

- "It Does Take a Village to Raise a Child: The Myth of Personal Responsibility," Chapter 11 of the 1998 book by Betty Holcomb, entitled *Not Guilty! The Good News About Working Mothers*.

- Provide personal counseling sessions for parents to talk about concerns they are having about their child or their own balance between work and family. Also, provide a referral list of therapists in the community who are supportive of working mothers.

- Speak of qualities of women in addition to their being nurturing, caring, and sensitive. Speak also of their ability to meet goals, learn new things, and make money for their family while also being loving mothers.

- Post information regarding the strengths of childcare centers that parents may not be aware of. A childcare setting offers different benefits than family life. For example, childcare center benefits for the child include:

- Child experiences social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development in a group setting.

- Child learns social skills such as turn-taking and sharing.

- Child learns to enjoy group efforts and team success.

- Child learns healthy competition and cooperation.

- Child learns to accept responsibilities given by other adults.

- Child has exposure to a wide range of resources such as books, toys, and music.

- Child is cared for by professionals trained in child development.



### Engaging in Communication with Parents

In order to effectively support working mothers, it is necessary to engage in positive communication with parents regarding childcare. All written and oral communication with parents should make clear the value system of the center as a "guilt free" zone for parents. If your childcare center has a newsletter, include a section with information that clearly values working mothers and fathers. Hang up articles that are supportive of working mothers. Next to these articles, post positive responses written by childcare teachers who have read the articles. In addition, consider distributing brochures with information about current childcare research. Hearing positive research findings can help mothers feel less guilty. For example, research reports that childcare does not diminish the influence of parents on young children. This diminishes the fear that too much care by others will shortchange a child, especially of the benefits of a mother's attention. Finally, look for magazine articles and book chapters that sup-

port and educate working mothers such as:

- “Profiles in Power” from Working Mother magazine (1999, June). This article discusses how working women have “quietly changed the world” by choosing to have a career and nurture a family.

- “Working Moms Are Good Moms” is Chapter 8 of a book entitled *She Works, He Works: How Two-Income Families are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off* by Rosalind Barnett & Caryl Rivers (1996). This chapter provides positive information about working mothers.

- “Will Only Mommy Do?” and “In the Care of Strangers: Day Care’s Enduring Stigma” are Chapters 7 and 8 of Betty Holcomb’s 1998 book entitled *Not Guilty! The Good News About Working Mothers*. These chapters are very inspirational reading for working mothers.

- “Ask the Children” by Ellen Galinsky cites children’s views on working mothers and family life. The responses she obtained are surprising, useful, and guaranteed to break the cycle of guilt and stress that traps mothers.

In addition, childcare workers can be supportive of working mothers by choosing words carefully during drop-off and pick-up times. Examples of thoughtful, empowering statements to say to working mothers include:

- “Your child is enjoying herself so much in our center and it is clear that you are still #1 in her life.”

- “Your child is so happy here!”

- “You are such a good role model for how to take care of yourself. You balance time for yourself, for exercising, for work, and for your children.”

- “Your child is gaining such a sense of independence by attending preschool.”

- “Children are so much healthier when their mom is involved with them and still takes time to have her own work and interests.”

#### Utilizing Educational Techniques with Children

Staff members can engage in positive discussions with children about working mothers. For example, while reading a book about the police force, a staff member can remind the children that Shelly’s mom is a wonderful police officer whose job is very important. During circle times and games, teach children that mothers work in order to earn money for families and to provide important skills and resources to the community.

#### Involving Fathers in Childcare

One of the primary ways that many working mothers are able to maintain work and family balance is through an equal partnership with their husbands. It is important to be supportive of involved fathers in order to simultaneously reduce “mother guilt.” Invite fathers to the above-mentioned workshop on co-parenting, or have a workshop for fathers to educate them about working women’s guilt so they can assist in eliminating guilt for their wives. It is important to educate parents about how involved fathers benefit their children, their partners, and themselves. A good resource for this is “The New Fatherhood,” Chapter 6 of *He Works, She Works: How Two-Income Families are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off* by Barnett & Rivers. Finally, provide messages that working fathers are not just workers but are also able to be loving, nurturing, and caring. Also, emphasize that when fathers share domestic labor equally, the family has more time for fun, play, and relaxation together.

Staff members must be educated

about the ways to reduce guilt among working mothers. They may need to engage in group discussions and dialogue to help with values clarification and feelings about day care, working mothers, and guilt. Finally, ongoing in-service training should be provided to staff members where they can be encouraged to brainstorm additional ways to reduce guilt among working mothers.

Women are entering and staying in the workforce in unprecedented numbers; therefore, utilizing childcare is a reality for the majority of today’s families. Strategies that childcare workers can employ to make mothers feel empowered, responsible, and “not guilty” will help the entire family system. Childcare workers have an opportunity and a responsibility to support and encourage mothers to find a “guilt free” balance between work and family.

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