

Parental guilt or shame

Briefing note



Summary

- 1 in 6 parents reported struggling with feelings of guilt or shame about their parenting
- Mothers were more likely to report experiencing guilt or shame about their parenting compared to fathers
- Parents of children with complex needs were more likely to struggle with guilt or shame than parents of children without complex needs
- Parents of children aged 3 to 12 years old were more likely to report feelings of guilt or shame about their parenting compared to parents of younger children





- Parents who reported struggling with feelings of guilt or shame were:
 - more likely to report psychological distress, worrying and tiredness, and to feel under constant time pressure
 - more likely to be self-critical
 - less likely to engage in self-care activities
 - more likely to report low confidence
 - more likely to report parenting challenges, including that parenting is more frustrating and demanding and wishing that they were more consistent in their parenting
- While many other factors were also associated with parent wellbeing and parenting practices, parental guilt or shame retained a strong and unique contribution to parent wellbeing and some parenting practices when controlling for these other factors.

What do we mean by guilt and shame?

Guilt and shame are commonly experienced emotions in the context of parenting.

Parental guilt and shame are triggered by a self-evaluation process whereby parents perceive their inability to meet either their own expectations or expectations placed on them by other people¹.

Guilt is often likened to negative evaluation of our own behaviour (“I’ve done something bad”) while shame is associated with negative evaluation of our self (“I’m bad”)².

Parental guilt or shame can each have significant impacts on wellbeing. When research investigated the relative contribution of parental guilt and shame separately, shame typically had a greater impact on parent wellbeing compared to guilt.

Parents are particularly likely to experience other people having expectations about them and others feeling free to voice those expectations, which can lead to feelings of being judged. For many, this could lead to increased feeling of guilt and shame.



Previous explorations of the role of guilt or shame in parental psychosocial health has indicated that, in mothers, parental guilt and shame were significant predictors of postnatal depression.

Parental guilt in mothers was found to be associated with stress, depression and anxiety symptoms as well as feelings of emptiness and loneliness³.

In a separate study, fathers' shame but not guilt was significantly related to stress, anxiety and depression⁴.

Parental guilt and shame have also been found to predict more intense grief reactions in bereaved parents⁵ and have been linked to more difficulties in adjustment for parents of children with burn injuries⁶.

The literature has also suggested that parents facing challenging circumstances (such as having a child with complex needs) who might perceive these circumstances as their own failure, are at greater risk of experiencing significant levels of guilt or shame^{7,8}.

This sense of shame and guilt has been associated with burden felt by the caregiver, greater child-parent conflict and lower child-parent closeness⁹.

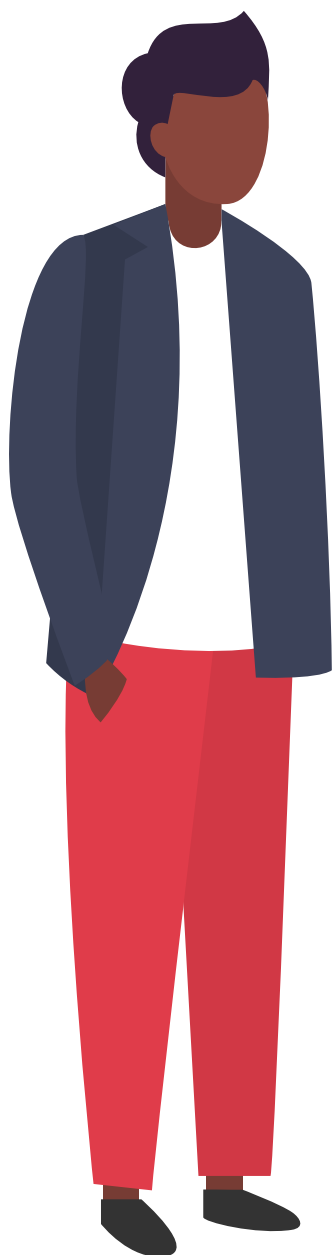


Parent shame and guilt has also been investigated in relation to help-seeking behaviours of mothers with infants.

Mothers' proneness to shame but not guilt has been found to be related to having a less positive attitude towards help-seeking¹⁰.

For this briefing note we have used data from the 2022 Parenting Today in Victoria survey to further explore how parental guilt or shame were related to parental wellbeing, parenting self-efficacy and parenting experiences and approaches.





Findings

- **Around a third of all parents may be struggling with guilt or shame.** One in six parents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I struggle with feelings of guilt or shame about my parenting', while one in five reported having mixed feelings.
- **Mothers were more likely to report experiencing guilt or shame** about their parenting compared to fathers¹¹. One in five mothers agreed or strongly agreed they struggled with guilt or shame about their parenting compared to one in ten fathers.
- **Greater parental guilt or shame was reported by parents of children with complex needs**¹². One in five parents of children with complex needs agreed or strongly agreed they struggled with guilt or shame about their parenting compared to one in ten parents of children without complex needs.
- **Parents of children aged 3-12 years old were more likely to report having difficulties with feelings of guilt or shame** compared to parents of children 0-2 years old, with parents of children 3-12 years old reporting the greatest struggle with guilt or shame about their parenting.
- **More guilt or shame was also experienced by parents from low-income households** compared to parents from high-income households and by parents with lower education levels compared to those with higher education.

Parental guilt or shame and parent wellbeing

Our research found that parental guilt or shame was associated with several aspects of parent wellbeing.

Parents who said they struggled with feelings of guilt or shame about their parenting were more likely to experience higher levels of psychological distress¹³ and to say they worry a lot.

Parental guilt or shame was also related to parental self-criticism and self-care, and associated with parents being more likely to feel they were under constant time pressure and more likely to report that tiredness gets in the way of being the parent they would like to be.

Parental guilt or shame was somewhat associated with parent work – parents who experienced

Not surprisingly, parents who reported struggling with guilt or shame were more likely to be critical about their parenting. They were less likely to forgive themselves when they made a mistake as a parent and were less likely to regularly engage in activities to help them relax and reenergise.

greater guilt or shame also tended to report their work performance suffered because of their personal and family commitments.

While many other factors also contributed to parent wellbeing, such as income, education, having a child with complex needs, and parenting self-efficacy, parental guilt or shame continued to contribute uniquely to parent wellbeing even after accounting for these factors.

Parental guilt or shame and parenting

Parenting experiences and parenting approaches

Parents reporting guilt or shame about their parenting were also more likely to find parenting frustrating and demanding.

They were also more likely to report wishing they did not become impatient so quickly with their child and wanting to be more consistent in their parenting compared to parents who did not feel guilt or shame about their parenting.

Similar to findings for parent wellbeing, we found that parental guilt or shame was playing a unique role in certain parenting practices (including arguing or yelling at their children and wanting to be more patient and consistent in their parenting



When parents reported more guilt or shame they were more likely to say that they argue or yell at their child about their behaviour or attitude.

approaches) after accounting for a range of factors, including parent income, level of education, having a child with complex needs, parent distress, tiredness and self-efficacy.

Parenting self-efficacy

Parental guilt and shame were associated with parenting self-efficacy¹⁴. Parents who reported struggling with feelings of guilt or shame were less likely to feel confident with their parenting.

Conclusions and implications

Findings from the Parenting Today in Victoria survey suggest one in three parents may be struggling with guilt and shame about their parenting.

Our findings also show that parental guilt or shame plays an important role in parent wellbeing, parenting self-efficacy, and in parenting experiences and approaches.

While we cannot determine causality, our research has consistently found that parental guilt or shame made a small but unique contribution to each of these areas even after accounting for other relevant factors.

Consistent with previous research, our findings showed that greater feelings of guilt or shame were associated with:

- greater parent psychological distress
- worrying
- tiredness
- feelings of being under constant time pressure.

More guilt or shame was also related to greater self-criticism and less engagement in self-care activities.

Shame and guilt impacts parenting confidence

Further challenges were identified in relation to parenting. Parents who reported greater guilt or shame about their parenting also identified they were less confident in their parenting, found parenting more frustrating and demanding, and wanted to be less impatient with their children and be more consistent in their parenting.

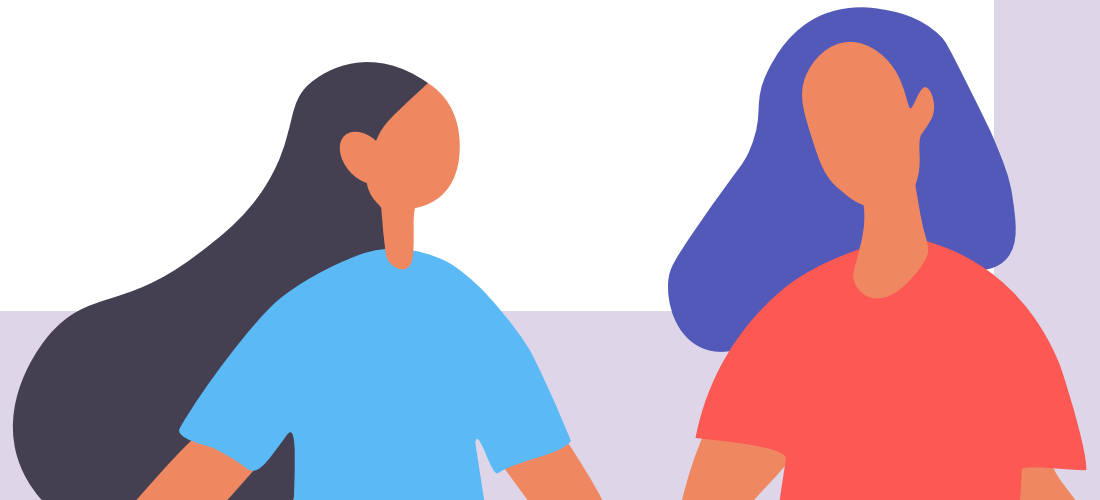
Greater struggles for parents of children with complex needs

Addressing guilt or shame about parenting may be particularly important for parents of children with complex needs, such as disability, learning difficulties, mental health

difficulties or behavioural problems, as parents of children with such needs tended to report greater struggles with guilt or shame compared to parents of children without complex needs.

Mothers feel it more

Mothers seemed to experience greater guilt or shame about their parenting than fathers. This may be due to women generally being more prone to guilt or shame than men^{15,16,17} or mothers being less likely to engage in self-care and self-compassion compared to fathers¹⁸.



What can we do about it?

Given the associations found between parent guilt and shame and other aspects of parenting, it may be important to address guilt and shame directly when talking to parents who are experiencing distress or challenges with parenting, and to provide them with strategies to lessen their sense of guilt and shame.

Teaching parents to express more self-compassion may be a helpful strategy. Previous research has found that self-compassion, which entails responding to difficult experiences with self-kindness, acceptance and a mindful stance⁶, has benefits for parent wellbeing¹ and can provide a buffer against parental guilt or shame⁶.

Since self-compassion may enhance parent wellbeing by reducing parental guilt and shame, interventions that can support parents to build and increase their self-compassion may help parents to better navigate parenting challenges and improve their wellbeing.

Even a simple prompt to guide parents to respond to their parenting struggles in more self-compassionate way has been found to be effective in reducing parental guilt and shame¹.



Increasing parenting self-efficacy may also assist parents in reducing their parenting guilt and shame and, consequently, improve parent and child outcomes.

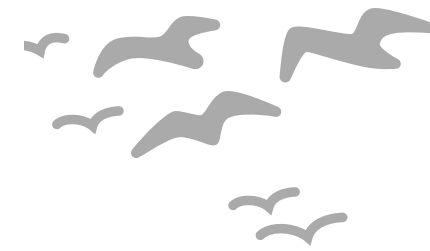


An experimental study that evaluated a group parenting program focusing on increasing parenting self-efficacy by addressing negative thoughts that often result in parental guilt, found that improving parenting self-efficacy was linked with a reduction in challenging child behaviours¹⁹.

The Parenting Today in Victoria survey has not explored parents' perceptions about guilt and shame as separate constructs.

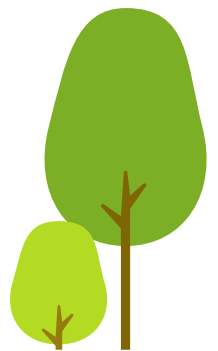
As other research has suggested, it may be helpful to differentiate these two constructs when investigating their potential impact on parenting as they often demonstrate a different pattern of affects³.

Our future surveys will ask about guilt and shame separately.



Endnotes

- 1 Sirois, F. M., Bögels, S., & Emerson, L. M. (2019). Self-compassion improves parental well-being in response to challenging parenting events. *The Journal of Psychology*, 153(3), 327-341.
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- 5 Duncan, C., & Cacciatore, J. (2015). A systematic review of the peer-reviewed literature on self-blame, guilt, and shame. *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 71(4), 312-342.
- 6 Hawkins, L., Centifanti, L. C., Holman, N., & Taylor, P. (2019). Parental adjustment following pediatric burn injury: The role of guilt, shame, and self-compassion. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 44(2), 229-237.
- 7 Marcinechová, D., Záhorcová, L., & Lohazerová, K. (2023). Self-forgiveness, Guilt, Shame, and Parental Stress among Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Current Psychology*, 1-16.
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- 9 Saber, E. H., Mohamed, E. A. E., & Mohammed, T. S. (2024). Guilt, Shame, Feeling of Burden and Child Parent Relationship among Parents of Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. *Assiut Scientific Nursing Journal*, 12(41), 108-123.
- 10 Dunford, E., & Granger, C. (2017). Maternal guilt and shame: Relationship to postnatal depression and attitudes towards help-seeking. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 26, 1692-1701.
- 11 Note: In this Briefing Note, where we report a difference or an association it means it was statistically significant at $p < .001$.
- 12 A child with 'complex needs' had at least one physical chronic health or medical condition, sensory impairment or learning difficulty, or behavioural or emotional difficulties that had lasted or were likely to last at least 6 months.



13 As measured by the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6), which is a simple self-report measure of psychological distress consisting of 6 questions about a person's emotional state. Reference: Kessler, R., Andrews, G., Colpe, L. J., Hiripi, E., Mroczek, D. K., Normand, S. L. T., ... Zaslavsky, A. M. (2002). Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in nonspecific psychological distress. *Psychological Medicine*, 32, 959–976.

14 As measured by the 4-item short form of the Me as a Parent scale (MaaPs-SF). Reference: Matthews, J., Millward, C., Hayes, L., & Wade, C. (2022). Development and validation of a Short-Form Parenting Self-Efficacy Scale: Me as a Parent Scale (MaaPs-SF). *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 31, 2292–2302.

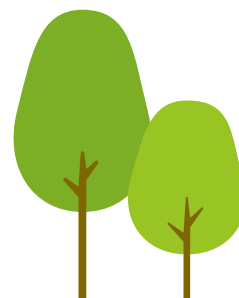
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About the Parenting Today in Victoria survey

The 2022 Parenting Today in Victoria survey used computer-assisted telephone interviewing to randomly survey 2602 Victorian parents and carers of children aged 0–18 years. In each family, one parent was interviewed in their preferred language.

Where questions required the parent to consider a particular child, they were asked to think about the one with the most recent birthday. The sample was weighted on parent education to match Victorian parents in the 2016 Australian Census (sample education was lowered for our sample).

Find out more

- [Parenting Research Centre](#)
- [Parenting Today in Victoria snapshot](#)

Contributing authors: Dr Elbina Avdagic, Dr Mandy Kienhuis, Dr Catherine Wade, Associate Professor Jan Matthews, Warren Cann

Published November 2024

Contact

Catherine Wade, Principal Research Specialist,
Parenting Research Centre

Email: cwade@parentingrc.org.au

Phone: 0407 941 056

