



© Joyce van Belkom



World Rights
Publishing House De Geus
Contact: Esther Bruls
P.O. Box 1878
4801 BW Breda
The Netherlands
Phone: (31) 76 522 8151
Fax: (31) 76 522 2599
Email: e.bruls@degeus.nl

DE GEUS www.degeus.nl

Kaat Schaubroeck

A Crushing Feeling of Responsibility: Why parents always feel guilty

Original title: *Een verpletterend gevoel van verantwoordelijkheid. Waarom ouders zich altijd schuldig voelen*

NONFICTION

A refreshing new look at parenthood and parenting

Is there a recipe for making children happy?

About the author

Kaat Schaubroeck (1968) is a graduate in Germanic Studies, a study choice inspired by her hunger for stories. She works as a journalist for the magazine *Libelle* and is especially fascinated by the way in which Dutch society deals with rapidly changing attitudes towards relationships. She writes about young people, work, relationships and the combination of all of these.

In her book *Almost Family: About reconstituted families* (2005) she tries to answer the question: Who is still family to whom? *A Crushing Feeling of Responsibility* is her second book.



About the book

As long as they are happy ...

Many parents feel totally responsible for the happiness and well-being of their children. They often feel they are letting their children down: because their child is ill or unhappy, because they have to divide their attention between family and work, because they are fretting about their divorce, because everything has to be perfect...

Journalist Kaat Schaubroeck interviewed parents who feel guilty towards their children for a variety of reasons and who were willing to share their story with the public. The cliché that only women feel that no matter what they do it's never quite enough is confuted by the testimonies of the men. Furthermore, these parents' stories reveal how their feelings of guilt are constantly being fanned by stubborn preconceptions about strong fathers and good mothers and by a deluge of parenting tips and advice.

But are there really recipes for making children happy? How much impact do you have as a parent? And who looks after the parents in a society in which all the emphasis seems to be on pursuing the happiness of the children? This book takes a refreshing new look at parenthood and parenting.

Kaat Schaubroeck, *Een verpletterend gevoel van verantwoordelijkheid. Waarom ouders zich altijd schuldig voelen*
ISBN 978 90 445 1328 8
Paperback, 288 pages
Date of publication: January 2010

Bibliography

Bijna familie. Over nieuw samengestelde gezinnen (Almost Family: About reconstituted families) (2005, nonfiction)
Een verpletterend gevoel van verantwoordelijkheid. Waarom ouders zich altijd schuldig voelen A Crushing Feeling of Responsibility: Why parents always feel guilty (2010, nonfiction)

The press about *Almost Family*

‘Kaat Schaubroeck’s book *Almost Family* is a demythologising account of reconstituted families, in which many real-life stories are presented frankly and honestly.’ – www.sanima.net

‘A very readable book, full of interesting social data, but above all filled with lots of beautiful, fascinating, occasionally painful and often moving testimonies. Recommended!’ – *Goed Gevoel*

‘Highly recommended for everyone who can no longer see the wood for the jumble of trees. Or, how heart-warming it can be to read the hesitant testimonies of people who are just like you.’ – www.famidoo.be

Excerpt

They resurface late in the evening, and only among the best of friends, but they always provide a feast of recognition: those stories about parental blunders, missed appointments, wrongly prepared bottle-feeds and favourite cuddly toys that accidentally ended up on the bin lorry. About Father Christmas drawings that were torn up. About that time when a broken foot was dismissed with the statement: You can’t go whining on about every little knock and bump. About the day that Fien fell out of her highchair and Lobke smacked against the bars of her cot after she was laid in it a little too abruptly. About the door that was slammed so hard in the middle of the night, when darling daughter absolutely refused to sleep, that the bookshelves in the nursery collapsed.

Oh, if only we could peek into other people’s houses. Not, like in *Big Brother*, peeking at strangers it wouldn’t be unfair to call freaks and exhibitionists, but at friends, sisters and neighbours, people to whom we are close. How that bungling on the parental stage would warm our hearts. And maybe someone would then write a book about that: about how

parenting is often nothing more than muddling on. Or as the English so prettily put it: 'It's like searching for a black cat in a dark room'. Each day with children is a fresh chance to fall flat on your face, and every new mistake provides an abundance of compost for every variety of guilty feeling. Like those decisions we take for their own good that sometimes go wrong. Or the days on which we work too late. Or don't work, but are mentally miles away when our children are trying to tell us something.

Feelings of guilt are as inseparably linked to parenthood as the Wolf is to Little Red Riding Hood. Because we dream of making a life for our children that is at least as good as and preferably better than our own, we try to be superlative parents. Their childhood will be like ours, only better, with a little correction here and there, or, if necessary, all the way along the line. That is the optimistic belief in progress with which we change their nappies, collect their vaccinations, take them to ballet class and mend their broken hearts: the unshakeable belief that we will bring forth a happier new generation, more loving and loved and with more opportunities. It is inevitable that sooner or later, however enthusiastic we are, we'll be confronted with our own limitations. 'You feel that perfection is possible, but that you can't achieve it,' says Geert, one of the parents interviewed in this book (divorced father of two sons and a daughter). 'And then you go and do stupid things that put that perfection even more out of reach. I discussed this recently with my mother and she said she sometimes also wondered: Have I done what's best for you?'

If that was all there was to it, then this might very well have been a thin little book. Feelings of guilt among parents: Why? That's why. (Because I say so.) Then I could have baked biscuits all summer with my child and you could have drawn mandalas on the following pages with yours. But it's not that simple. In previous centuries children haven't been able to count upon nearly as much tenderness, fathers and mothers haven't always been this concerned about their happiness, and that raises the question of whether or not feelings of guilt have always been a part of parenting. My theory is that feelings of guilt have been greatly fanned in the past few decades, thanks to the fact that we are bombarded with expertise, facts, studies, tips and pedagogic advice. These have reinforced our inkling that every child is perfect by nature and that every oaf of a parent can mess it up, just like that. They have saddled us with a crushing feeling of responsibility: We have slowly come to believe that we and we alone have to keep all the balls in the air when it comes to our children's well-being.

Conversations with dozens of parents have convinced me that feelings of guilt not only give rise to lots of unnecessary fretting and futile sacrifices, but that those very feelings of guilt are themselves anything but guiltless. No less than twenty of the thirty-one parents I interviewed for this book mentioned depression or feeling depressed. That is not scientific data, of course, and in almost every case more was involved than just feelings of guilt, but the link was nevertheless striking. Not to say unnerving. Will we all soon need a pill to help us cope with the pressures of parenthood?

To work then. And besides, why should I bake biscuits when somebody has already invented the chocolate-coated teacake?