Understanding Children's Experiences of Guilt and Confusing Emotions

Life Tales

A companion to Dylan's Big Decisions

This factsheet is designed to support adults to better understand children's experiences of guilt and confusing emotions, using *Dylan's Big Decisions* as a shared reference point. It does not replace professional support.

Instead, it offers insight, reassurance, and practical understanding to help adults respond with calm, connection, and emotional safety.

What This Can Look Like in Children

Children don't always recognise guilt or emotional conflict as feelings they can name. Instead, these experiences often show up as hesitation, withdrawal, frustration, or feeling "stuck." Children may feel pulled in different directions at once — wanting one thing while feeling responsible for another.

Why This Can Feel So Big

Children are still learning how to hold mixed emotions at the same time. When loyalty, love, anger, sadness, or obligation collide, a child's nervous system can struggle to make sense of it all. Without enough emotional language or perspective, the experience can feel overwhelming. In Dylan's Big Decisions, Dylan isn't struggling because he can't decide — he's struggling because both options matter deeply to him.

Why This Often Comes Out as Behaviour

When children don't yet have words for emotional conflict, it often shows up through behaviour.
A child may:

- Shut down rather than choose to talk
- Become angry or defiant
- Withdraw from activities they usually enjoy
- Feel guilty even when they haven't done anything wrong

It is a signal that the child is holding more than they can carry alone.

What Children Need Most

Children don't need the "right" answer.
They need:

- Reassurance that mixed feelings are okay
- Permission to care about more than one thing
- Adults who don't rush them to choose
- Space to talk without pressure

Find more resources at
www.ourlifetales.com.au

Children experiencing guilt or confusing emotions may:

- Feel torn between people, places, or responsibilities
- Worry about disappointing others
- Appear irritable or emotionally flat
- Avoid decisions or ask for reassurance repeatedly
- Feel responsible for situations outside their control

These responses are not immaturity or manipulation. They are signs of emotional overload.

Helpful responses include:

- Naming that mixed emotions are normal
- Reassuring children they are not Responsible for adult outcomes
- Staying calm when children feel stuck
- Focusing on emotional safety before decisions
- Feeling supported makes it easier for children to think clearly over time.

A Gentle Reminder

- Children are not responsible for fixing complex situations.
- Guilt and emotional conflict are not signs of weakness — they are signs of care and connection.
- Children need to know they are allowed to hold love, anger, sadness, and hope at the same time.

Some amazing resources to check out!

- https://suelarkey.com.au
- Understanding Shame
- Complex Care
- Fiona Zandt
- Dr Ross Greene



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