

When Guilt Is Good

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A few years ago, researchers in Germany set out to plumb the moral consciences of small children. They invited a series of 2- and 3-year-olds to play with a marble track in a lab. Close to the track—inauspiciously close—was a block tower that one of the adult experimenters claimed to have painstakingly constructed. Just before turning her back, she asked them not to damage it.

Needless to say, the game was rigged. After a few runs, a marble would knock over part of the tower, at which point the experimenter responded with what the resulting journal article described as a “mildly sad” tone. “Oh no,” she would say, then ask what had happened. In some versions of the experiment, the child seemed to be to blame; in others, an adult who was helping with the experiment toppled the tower. The kids’ reactions revealed a lot about how social-emotional development progresses during these key years. While many of the 2-year-olds seemed sympathetic to the researcher’s plight, the 3-year-olds went beyond sympathy. When they believed that they’d caused the accident, they were more likely than the 2-year-olds to express regret and try to fix the tower. In other words, the 3-year-olds’ behavior varied depending on whether they felt responsible.

Their actions, according to Amrisha Vaish, the University of Virginia psychology researcher who led the study, demonstrate “the beginnings of real guilt and real conscience.” Vaish is one of a number of scholars studying how, when, and why guilt emerges in children. Unlike so-called basic emotions such as sadness, fear, and anger, guilt emerges a little later, in conjunction with a child’s growing grasp of social and moral norms. Children aren’t born knowing how to say “I’m sorry”; rather, they learn over time that such statements appease parents and friends—and their own consciences. This is why researchers generally regard so-called moral guilt, in the right amount, to be a good thing: A child who claims responsibility for knocking over a tower and tries to rebuild it is engaging in behavior that’s not only reparative but also prosocial.