

Parenting Together

VOLUME 7, ISSUE 4

April 2021

Helping Children Deal with Disappointment

Whether it's a cancelled play date, an ice cream cone that falls on the ground, missing in-person schooling, sports, and play dates, or a broken promise due to unforeseen circumstances, life is full of disappointments of varying sizes. And, unfortunately, we have seen a lot of disappointment over the past year. While your gut instinct as a caring parent might be to sweep the disappointment out of the way by offering a quick solution, parents can't always protect their children from letdowns. And that is okay!

When children learn that they have what it takes to work through difficult feelings caused by disappointing situations, they are able to build resilience and coping skills. This then empowers them to recover from setbacks, solve problems independently, and figure out how to process all of their emotions. So, it turns out that disappointment can be a valuable teaching tool when it comes to emotional development.

Now, don't get me wrong, that's not to say that teaching children to handle disappointment is easy or that children have the ability to work through disappointment on their own. With support and discussions about coping with disappointment and overcoming obstacles, young children can learn how to handle life's disappointments, big and small. Try the following tips to help your child learn these invaluable skills.



Listen, Validate, and Empathize

As parents, our first impulse is often to try to fix problems for our children, but that may not always be what is most helpful. Remember that your child is coming to you because she needs empathy and understanding, not a rock-solid coping plan. So, instead of trying to fix, simply start by listening. Acknowledge their feelings - their frustration or disappointment.

Children respond to disappointment in different ways, and there's no perfect response to these feelings. Some children might immediately erupt into tantrums while others become silent, sullen or stubborn. It's important to remember that coping with disappointment is even difficult for adults at times. This isn't a skill that kids can learn in a day. And while tantrums might feel embarrassing or overwhelming in the moment, we all need to vent at times.

Use empathic responses like, "I understand that this is difficult. I know you feel disappointed right now." Give your child the time and space to cry, feel sad and soak up a hug from mom, dad, a grandparent, caregiver, etc. Meet their heated responses with your own calm ones to model healthy coping strategies and save the discussion for a later, calmer moment. What your child needs most in the heat of the moment is empathy and understanding. You can review positive ways to handle disappointment after your child recovers from the disappointing event.

Additionally, it is important to avoid judging their reactions. Being upset about not getting a certain toy might seem like it should not matter, but invalidating the pain that our children are feeling by telling them it's "no big deal," for example) may just make them feel more isolated and less likely to share their feelings in the future.



Oregon State
University

Aim to Guide, not necessarily to Fix

As a parent, you simply can't be there to soothe every difficult emotion or solve every tough problem for your child as they grow. It is important to act as a guide when it comes to managing setbacks instead of jumping in with the fix-it solution.

The next time your child comes to you for help with a disappointment, try asking a few questions that empower them to work through the problem themselves:

- What happened that led to that feeling?
- What were you wishing would happen?
- How did you show or talk about your feelings? What else could you have done?
- What can be done differently the next time?

Prompting questions like these can help your child brainstorm the problem and think through possible solutions while you comfort them. You can also help your child find ways to express their disappointment in a way that is okay in your family (e.g., using their words).

Teach your Children Self-Calming Skills

Parents can't prevent disappointing things from happening, but they can reduce distress in response to these events by helping children manage expectations and develop self-calming skills.

Learning how to process uncomfortable emotions plays an important role in helping children cope with disappointment. When parents model and teach self-calming skills, children learn that they can get through hard things.

All children are different and have different needs when it comes to calming down, but try some of these ideas to get started:

- Breathe the rainbow — practice deep breathing while thinking about things for each color of the rainbow.
- Listen to soft music
- Have some quiet time & snuggle up with a stuffed animal or a few favorite toys
- Get outside to play
- Use art to work through feelings — coloring, drawing and molding clay can all be relaxing.

Have Faith in Your Children

It takes time to develop the skills to cope with disappointment. Be patient when your child has big reactions to seemingly small events. Sometimes a good venting helps kids work through their emotions so that they can think more rationally about the disappointing event and what they can do to recover.

Think about how you manage your disappointment. Share your feelings with your child and let them know what you are doing to manage disappointment. Just like with any other feelings, our children look and learn from our examples.

The Book Nook

The Safe Return
by Ashley Wheelock

Dos ardillas y una piña
by Rachel Bright

*Be a Virus Warrior!: A Kid's Guide
to Keeping Safe*
by Eloise Macgregor

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