

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Responding to a Child's Disappointment

“I wish I could show you, when you are lonely or in darkness,
the astonishing light of your own being.”

~ *Hafiz*

CHILDREN'S EMOTIONS CAN BE CONTAGIOUS, and few feelings are more perplexing to adults than a child's disappointment. A friend confided that as a child she had to stop telling her father when she experienced a setback since he would start crying. Which of us hasn't taken a child's devastation to heart, even if we can maintain composure? A playmate rejects our child's invitation to play. Our child fumbles the ball, causing her team to lose the game.

None of us welcomes sad events into our child's life. Yet we wouldn't want our protective instincts to deter a child's experience of learning to cope with disappointment. Our goal is to give our children the emotional support they need to pick themselves up from the inevitable bumps in the road they will encounter.

Avoid asking “Why?” Children don't want to have to defend their feelings. Asking “Why are you upset about that?” sends the message that their emotions aren't valid. Research shows that when adults validate disappointment over minor events consistently, children have less stress hormones in their blood. Unconditional support helps them manage obstacles with less duress.

Put away the sugar. Offering children sweets to make difficult emotions go away leads to eating disorders. One mother named her family's motto about stress “I'm having a feeling, get out the brownies.” We don't want to teach children that having a feeling is like a fire that needs to be put out. Let's show them that we know disappointment hurts because we have experienced setbacks too.

Urge your child to problem-solve. Instead of giving children advice on how to recoup from a downfall, ask what their ideas are. When a child feels bad about a test grade, instead of saying “You have to study harder!” ask what she feels would help her spelling or math skills. Children often report social learning in negative ways: “Sally was mean to me today.” Rather than saying “Don't play with her anymore,” ask your child what she thinks the best solution would be.

Separate your feelings from theirs. Children's losses often trigger our painful memories. A preschool mom began crying one day when another child told her daughter she didn't want to play. Teachers understood and felt compassion for her, but they knew that over time she would see how resourceful her daughter was becoming at moving on from disappointment to engage in something else.

Go for the gratitude. The flip side of disappointment is gratitude. We don't want to talk children out of their feelings, but we can help reframe them by pointing out a positive. (“Your team lost, but you scored a goal.” “You didn't get exactly what you wanted for your birthday, but you had fun at your party.”)

We want the things we say to our children to be the kind of nurturing words they can use to boost their own sense of well-being when we're not there. In essence, let's show that we fully understand feelings of disappointment but believe in the light within them and their abilities to handle whatever life brings.

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