



**PARENT SENSE** VICKI CURRAN, EDS, MA, LPC, NCC

## The gift of disappointment

It's difficult to see our children upset or hurting. As parents, of course we want what's best for them. But what happens when what's best for them is painful?

Sometimes we have to let our children experience disappointment. They can't always get a trophy just for participating. They can't always quit when it isn't fun anymore. And they shouldn't always immediately get what they want. Sure, it's hard for them to experience these things, but isn't that the motivation to try harder, honor their commitments and figure out how to earn something they want rather than be instantly gratified?

Parents need to let their children experience disappointment without intervening. If we, as parents, continue to go to such great lengths to make sure everything is fair, to ensure that our children do not experience adversity or frustration, or to guarantee that they are not disappointed in any way, we are unintentionally shielding our children from incredible learning opportunities.

A child who has been protected from unhappiness may have trouble dealing with disappointment as a child and as an adult. At my position at TCNJ, I am surprised to see how many college-aged students lack problem solving

skills and resilience to struggle through difficult times. Why is this? Have they not had to do it before now? As a parent, I completely understand this nurture and protect instinct ... but coping with disappointment is key to a successful, balanced life.

The greatest gift we can give our children is to take some time to teach them how to deal with disappointment, not avoid it. Instead of trying to prevent or "fix" difficulties for them, we need to be with them in their disappointment. Allow them to feel sad, left out, or angry. Let the moment happen and then talk to them about how to move forward.

Parents can help children navigate difficult situations by responding effectively. First, pause and breathe. Our own emotions are going to come up, but sometimes we have to put them on hold in order to see what our kids really need from us. Second, ask yourself, "What does my child need from me right now?" Often, they don't really need us to fix the problem,

they need a supportive, empathetic ear. Third, listen without interrupting or jumping in with advice too quickly. Get the facts and try to understand it from your child's perspective. Finally, ask them what they think they would like to do about it. Brainstorm possible solutions together and then think ahead to the outcomes of each one so they can choose the best possible direction. Remember, your role as a parent is to balance reassurance with coaching — your child's experience may feel large and overwhelming, but you can help by reinforcing

that the feelings are temporary and common.

Most of the time, all our children need is a safe space to vent their frustrations. In order for our children to learn how to do hard things, they have to experience hard things. There is no other way to truly master anything. And what greater feeling as a parent would it be to discover that our children can learn to handle disappointment and move on from it?

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For more information or a list of local licensed professionals, contact Coastal Community Counseling Resources at 732-612-3148.