How to Help Your Child Recognize & Understand Disappointment

Alyson Jiron, Brooke Brogle, & Jill Giacomini

Disappointment is a normal, though difficult, part of growing up. Your child is likely to experience disappointment as she makes new friends, tries new things and experiences the ups and downs of her world. Whether it’s a trip to the park that is ruined by rain or missing a birthday party, life is full of little and big disappointments. When you allow your child to feel, experience and learn from little disappointments at an early age, you help her to create the skills she will need to successfully handle the bigger disappointments she will experience later in childhood and as an adult.

Try This at Home

- Notice and label when you, your child or others are disappointed. Explain that everyone, including adults, feel disappointment. You might say:
  - About yourself: “I am disappointed. Grandma was supposed to come for a visit but she is home sick. I’m going to make her a Get Well card.”
  - About your child: “You have tears in your eyes. I see you are disappointed. You really wanted to go to the park but it is raining. I wonder what we can do on a rainy day like today?”
  - About others: “That little girl is really disappointed. Her mommy told her she could not have an ice cream. I wonder what she can do to feel better in her body.”

Practice at School

Children can become disappointed at school when their excitement or expectations about a toy, activity or person don’t turn out the way they want. Each child handles disappointment differently and teachers help children to recognize how they are feeling and begin to think about ways to find solutions for their problem so they can feel positive again. As a class, children learn by watching their peers solve their own problems and try to think about solutions themselves.

The Bottom Line

Disappointment can be a healthy and positive, although unpleasant, emotion in young children. The disappointment of not getting to wear the princess dress, dropping the ice cream cone or not being first in line prepares children to deal with life’s greater obstacles in later childhood and adulthood. Parents can help their children recognize and understand disappointment, soothe themselves and problem solve. While tempting, it is not helpful for parents to try to keep their children from feeling disappointment and have life always flow smoothly. Parents can help their children so much more if they instead teach them how to recognize and cope with all of their feelings (i.e. anger, joy, excitement and disappointment) and teach children how to cope with emotions instead of expressing themselves with challenging behaviors.