How to Help Your Child Recognize & Understand Disappointment

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.
How to Help Your Child Recognize & Understand Sadness

Sadness is one of the easiest emotions for young children to understand, and one of the first emotions that they can lean to recognize in others. Everyone feels sad at one time or another for a variety of reasons. As parents, we want to empower our children to recognize when they are feeling sad and, if needed, take steps to help themselves feel better or ask someone else for help. When you help your child recognize the physical features that accompany feeling sad and understand the reasons why someone might feel sad, you are helping your child create the necessary building blocks for him to manage his own emotions and relationships. Sometimes simply acknowledging your child’s sadness is all that is needed. For example, saying to your child “You are so sad that it is time to leave the park.”

Try This at Home

Notice and label when you, your child or others are sad. You might say:

» About yourself, “I’m feeling really sad that Grandma went home. Maybe I’ll call her.”
» About your child: “It looks like you are sad. You have tears in your eyes and your head is down.”
» About others: “That little boy looks really sad. I wonder what might make him feel better?”

Read books about being sad. Talk with your child about what the character is feeling and corresponding activities to help your child learn about emotions at: http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html#list

Share with your child times when you felt sad. What happened? What did you do? Did you stay sad forever? It is important for children to learn that emotions can (and do!) change.

Use your child’s play as a way to act out sad situations. For example, you could say, “Oh no, this train is super sad. All the other trains are playing together and he feels sad and lonely.”

Practice at School

Whether a child is sad because a parent left, a toy broke or they fell down, there are many opportunities for him to learn what to do when someone feels sad. Teachers label the emotion for the child, (i.e. saying “You look sad”) and then begin to let the child come up with a solution to help him feel better. This may be a hug, a story or a special object. As children become more capable, they themselves learn to offer comfort to their peers.

The Bottom Line

The way a child feels and behaves are closely related. Children who can manage their own emotions are better prepared to control their behavior. Children who can recognize their own feelings are better able to remain calm and use words, rather than challenging behavior, to communicate.