



How to Help Your Child Recognize and Understand Disappointment

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



Suggestions for Families

Notice and name when you, your child, or others are disappointed. Explain that everyone, including adults, feels disappointed sometimes. 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 could do on a rainy day like today?"
- **About others:** "That little girl is crying. She looks disappointed. Her mommy told her she couldn't have ice cream. I wonder what she can do to feel better?"

Practice ways to handle disappointment before a potentially disappointing incident occurs. For example, if you know your child will be disappointed if someone else is on their favorite swing, come up with appropriate solutions ahead of time. You could say, "When we go to the playground, someone else might be on your favorite swing. You might feel disappointed. What could you do to stay calm?" Come up with some solutions such as asking the child for a turn, saying please, or bringing a shovel and pail to play in the sandbox while the other child is on the swing.

Encourage and practice problem solving. "I know you are disappointed to miss Sophie's birthday party. You are a great card maker; I bet you will find a way to wish her a happy birthday."

Disappointment can quickly lead to feelings of anger if not acknowledged. Acknowledge your child's feelings without overreacting. "You really wanted the red cup. Your sister has the red cup today. You can choose the blue or the green one."

Role model how small disappointments can sometimes end up being positive. "I was so disappointed that the car was getting fixed today, but I ended up having so much fun with you. It was a great day!"

Suggestions for Educators

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

The Bottom Line

Disappointment can be a healthy, although uncomfortable, 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 greater obstacles later in life. Parents and caregivers can help their children recognize and understand disappointment, learn to soothe themselves, and solve problems. While tempting, it is not helpful for parents to try to prevent their children from feeling disappointment and have life always flow smoothly. Instead, parents can help their children much more by helping them learn how to recognize and cope with **all** their feelings (i.e. anger, joy, excitement and disappointment) and showing children ways to express these emotions in a healthy way.

