

Your Family Matters

...because family does

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Roberta Rachel Omin, LCSW
(914) 941-8179

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Disappointment is Never Easy...

Helping Your Kids Cope



"Arghhh!!!" Not getting past level three on his play station, Jeff had a meltdown when he was called to dinner. Sarah is despondent. She studied hard for her math test and only received a 'C.' Maya, a solid 'A' student, feels stupid. She got her first 'B' on an English essay. Randy acted as if nothing was wrong, even though his Dad broke a promise to take him to a Yankee game. Amanda is furious and embarrassed that she can no longer shop at the Westchester due to her family's economic downturn. What do these kids have in common? They're all grappling with disappointment.

Disappointment is the emotion we experience when our expectations are not met or when someone lets us down. Mixed with feelings of loss, sadness, hurt or anger, the combination of these emotions are very difficult for kids—let alone adults. As we grow, we learn there are gradations of disappointment, but when children feel it, they do so whole-heartedly.

Part of the parent/child experience is **your child wanting something you don't want to do or cannot provide him**. Your child has a right to express her wanting or wishing for something. You have a right to say "no" without anger or guilt. Rather than react as if she were greedy or unappreciative, which creates a confrontation; mirror her disappointment. "I know you wish you could have it and it is disappointing not to." Pause a while so she can take in that you understand what she is feeling. Then, add "I can't see my way to doing it now" or "I don't believe it is good for you." A kind and calm "no" is the beginning stage of helping your child live through disappointment.

The Disappointment Trap

We want the best for our children. We do our kids and ourselves a disservice when we try to rescue; fight their battle without discovering what happened; when we react with "Get a grip son and just move on;" say "Let me make it up to you;" or not let them be involved in the solution. On the other hand, letting your child brood in self-pity or being unavailable aren't the answers either. Learning how to cope with disappointment is an important life lesson for all of us. Goodness knows, no one is exempt.

Externalize or Internalize Depending on your child's temperament, he will usually internalize or externalize his dissatisfaction. Below are examples of how this shows up in kids.

Externalizing

- melting down
- blaming others
- threatening, bullying
- using physical aggression
- stomping, slamming
- damaging property

Internalizing

- withdrawing, giving up
- blaming self
- avoiding or denying
- less spontaneity
- developing physical symptoms
- becoming rigid and inflexible



“The more we shelter children from every disappointment, the more devastating future disappointments will be.”

Fred G. Gosman from *How to Be a Happy Parent...In Spite of Your Children*

Unsure What to Do When Your Child Is Disappointed?

In not wanting our children to “suffer,” we often try to “fix” the problem or ‘rescue’ our children prematurely so they will be happy again. When we go into these modes, we are having a difficult time with our own reactions. Jon’s dad’s was distressed that his son didn’t get to play goalie, “I can’t stand Jon being so unhappy. I’ll call the coach now.” Sarah’s mom was anxious and distraught and tried to minimize her daughter’s sadness about getting only a ‘C’ when she studied so hard. While saying “It’s not the end of the world” was meant to be supportive, Sarah got angry.

“You can’t fast forward your child’s life, no matter how much you want to.”
Jodi Picoult from *Nineteen Minutes*

What We Can Do

We can help our children develop emotionally healthy ways of being with their disappointment. Working with families in my private practice, I have found the following approach helpful in dealing with most children’s painful feelings.

- Separate your own feelings from your child’s
- Put yourself in your child’s shoes
- Heart-fully acknowledge your child’s distress
- Take time to reflect your child’s feeling back to him
- After your child feels understood, ask what he thinks can be done about his predicament

1. Separate your feelings from your child’s. Odds are he’s having an entirely different experience than you. What is your child’s feeling and what is your own? When parents can’t bear their child’s disappointment, sadness, or hurt, they want to protect their child by making it better. It isn’t easy tolerating feeling your child’s struggle when your own feelings get in the way. If you are able to, you will be helping him cope with his distress.

2. Put yourself in your child’s shoes. Based on your child’s hopes and age, what would you be feeling and expressing if you didn’t get the part you hoped to get in the school play or if your best friend deserted you? How would you feel if you failed your driving test on the first try or your family holiday vacation had to be cancelled?

3. Most disappointments just have to be acknowledged with empathy. Watch out for judging, criticizing or making your child feel bad, or trying to talk him out of his feelings. While the situation may be insignificant on an adult scale, it isn’t for your child. Denying or minimizing won’t help. He’ll think you don’t care. The subsequent anger and frustration will be transferred to you because he will feel misunderstood. No parent wants to become the target for misplaced hurt or helplessness. Compassion shows children we’re on their side and their ally.

4. Compassion is conveyed by taking time to reflect with your child. “I hear your disappointment and hurt about Megan not coming over as she promised. I know you were planning to work on the project together.” My rule of thumb: say what is true for the feeling from your child’s perspective, without the cold water of objective reality being poured too soon. When your child feels heard, seen and understood, she will be able to move onto something else. Later on she may be receptive to a rational re-assessment after her emotions have been tended to and she feels soothed.

“Acknowledging feelings is a skill that takes time and practice and doesn’t come naturally to many of us because we want our child to be happy, not sad or angry or afraid.”

Nancy Samalin from *Loving Your Child Isn’t Enough*

Reflection can be done without repeating what your child said verbatim; paraphrase instead. Ask clarifying questions with genuine curiosity (not interrogation). “Sarah, what makes you feel this way?” her dad asked with true wonder and interest rather than annoyance. Say “ah ha” or “I see what you mean.” Help him discover and express what he means. Give the emotion a name. “Are you feeling sad?” These responses help your child take in your love even though he is disappointed. They demonstrate that you are taking him seriously. At first, it may feel unusual to you and your child because this may have not been your style. Over time, reflecting this way will feel comforting and rewarding.

5. Ask your child what she thinks can be done about the problem? Some kids just need you to keep them company in the “feeling puddle” for a short while. If coming up with a solution is needed, see what she comes up with. You might assist with tweaking her ideas, adding a new thought or asking her how she would carry it out. By coming up with some or all of her own answers, she develops her own competence and courage to act on her solution. If she suggests going to the mall or buying a toy that is using things as a salve. Better yet, suggest a temporary distraction such as cooking or a walk together in order to get some emotional space from the incident so you can come back to talking about the feelings without being in the overwhelming pain of it.

In the bit-by-bit process of helping our children cope with disappointment, they discover that they:

- Can tolerate the frustration of learning a new skill (that can't be mastered overnight)
- Will survive not always having what they want
- Being human means being human, not perfect
- Can effectively deal with feelings and receive support
- Will be let down by the reality of people and events from time to time

Furthermore, given the current economic climate, we may be cutting back on more of our material wants and learning to do with less. We can help our children live with these new realities as well.

Keep An Eye Out for Red Flags

As much as we want to protect our children, life presents losses and dissatisfactions. Some kids, though, are faced with repeated, long-term or extreme disappointments. They may develop chronic symptoms rather than passing reactions. Red flags that indicate your child may need professional help are:

- Gives up easily without practicing or making future attempts
- Exhibits an ongoing unwillingness to take appropriate 'risks'
- Expresses hopelessness or resignation
- Avoids new situations
- Acts lethargic or depressed
- Has heightened anxiety, withdrawal or anger
- Caught in a cycle of bitterness
- Overly concerned about being hurt or betrayed

Wrap Up

None of us, young or old, escape disappointment. Rather than enable internalizing or ban externalizing of their feelings, what is needed is to help our kids have an emotionally healthy response. By practicing the skills described above, you support your child's resilience and creativity in learning how to move through the inevitable disappointments, broken promises, hurts, and losses as well unmet realistic and unrealistic expectations that life naturally brings.

**Need help helping your child cope with disappointment?
Would parent coaching strengthen and deepen your family bonds?**

**Please call 914 941-8179 or email me at GoodOmin@NecessaryChoices.com
Visit my website: www.NecessaryChoices.com**

The choices we make define the lives we live!



Roberta Rachel Omin, LCSW, has her psychotherapy and counseling practice in Ossining and Rye Brook, NY. She is holistically and systems trained to work with families, couples and individuals; and has authored many articles on these issues. Roberta has trained in Gestalt therapy, Internal Family Systems and EMDR. With almost thirty years of experience, she brings sensitivity; authenticity and wisdom to help the people she works with achieve healthier more satisfying relationships.