

Coping with Disappointment

Although dealing with disappointment is an important and inescapable part of childhood, one of the hardest things for parents is seeing kids fall short of their goals. Not only does it hurt us to see them feeling sad, disappointed, or rejected, but also it's challenging to know how to help them. Yet our response, and the lessons it teaches our children, is vital to their development. Typically, life gives us plenty of opportunities--for example, dealing with a 11-year-old who doesn't make a premier sports team, a 14-year-old who gets turned down by a competitive orchestra, a 16-year-old who isn't elected to student government, or a 13-year-old who doesn't get a leading role in the school play. In my view, how we respond powerfully shapes the way our teens and tweens process these experiences, feel about themselves, and make future decisions.

During the past weeks, when many high school seniors heard back from colleges, I was reminded many times of our key parental roles. Of course, it is far easier to respond helpfully when our teens are accepted to their dream schools. But this year many students and their parents were shocked by rejections from colleges they considered "safeties" rather than "matches." In many cases, the news sent families reeling.

Mothers and fathers reported feeling "awful" or sick," "unable to sleep," and withdrawing from people to avoid having to talk about college. These initial reactions to disappointment are perfectly normal and understandable. By acknowledging our feelings, we are modeling for our kids that it is okay to be upset and distressed when they don't get what they want--whether it's a romantic partner, internship, or graduate school slot. And then we all have to move on.

The Healing Process

Since disappointments are inevitable life experiences, it is important for kids to know how to cope well. What does that mean? Well, first to allow themselves to have genuine emotional reactions, which often tell them important information about themselves and their goals. Then they must get up, brush themselves off, and go on to their next endeavor. Throughout this process, young people can develop resiliency and adaptability. Here are some ways parents can contribute:

- Empathize with kids' feelings, whatever they are. That way, they will feel heard, validated, and taken seriously. Focusing on our children's emotions requires, however, that we can recognize and manage our own. Be sure to express that you're proud of your children's efforts. After all, if they never fall short of their goals, kids are probably aiming their sights too low.
- Provide perspective. Communicate that the situation, however distressing, is not tragic. They will recover from their disappointment and find new opportunities. Besides, no school, premier team, or romantic partner is ideal. If they put their minds to it, they can thrive in many different situations. This is one of the most important lessons we get from disappointments and failures. But your kids will believe this message only when they sense that you are not devastated. Teens take their cues from their parents.
- Be voices of reason. It is true that decisions sometimes are unfair. Summer jobs or internships may go to those with better connections, kids may be sick on the day of an important audition, or the company they want to hire them may institute a job freeze. But rather than dwelling on unfortunate circumstances or blaming other people for their disappointments, guide kids to focus on what is within their control. Parents can convey that it's time to regroup: "Okay, so now let's think about other options..." Over time, this helps teens to broaden their thinking and develop creative problem-solving.

The Challenges

Like most parental approaches, these strategies are easier to suggest than to use. Parenting effectively when kids endure difficult disappointments has several prerequisites. If the parent-teen relationship is strong and mutually trusting, teens will be more inclined to hear what their parents say as neutral, helpful, and supportive.

If, however, kids don't think their mothers and fathers can be objective, it will be more difficult to have comfortable, useful family conversations around these thorny issues. In my practice last week, I saw a high school senior who, after grieving for her many rejections, successfully shifted gears--well before her parents did. Frustrated, Lorrie needed her mother and father to get past their own anguish so they could help plan the college visits that would help her decide which school to attend.

Here are some signs that you need to do some reflection before you can be most helpful to your disappointed teen or tween:

1. You're more invested in a particular goal--for example, your son attending a particular private school or winning a sports championship--than he is.
2. Your teen's dashed hopes remind you painfully of your own youthful disappointments.
3. When she hears bad news, your daughter seems less disappointed than worried about how you'll react, and is overly anxious to make you proud.

When we are overly focused on our kids' achievements in areas that were important to us in the past (e.g., academic, athletic, romantic), it is that much harder to separate their lives from our own. But this is key if we are to remain present and emotionally attuned to them at critical times of disappointments. It is unfair to allow kids to be responsible for pleasing us or making us happy. As a teen tennis player once explained to me, "When I lose a match, my father gets so upset that I feel like a double failure."

Along with giving teens and tweens opportunities to succeed, parents should also provide freedom for them to try for something and fall short. Then, we should be disappointed for them--not in them.

About Roni Cohen-Sandler

Dr. Roni Cohen-Sandler is a clinical psychologist specializing in parenting; the issues of women and adolescent girls, mother-daughter relationships; and neuropsychological assessments (e.g., for learning difficulties, attention disorders, etc.). Described as an energizing, humorous, and inspiring speaker, she presents lectures and workshops to public and private schools, community organizations, hospitals, corporations, and universities. She is the author of three books, including the national best-seller *I'm Not Mad, I Just Hate You!*, *Trust Me, Mom--Everyone Else is Going!* and her most recent, *Stressed-Out Girls: Helping Them Thrive in the Age of Pressure*.

Dr. Cohen-Sandler is a frequent expert for national media, appearing on *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *NPR*, and *Oprah*. She has been quoted in publications such as *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, *Marie Claire*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Seventeen*, *Parenting*, *Teen People*, *Family Circle*, *Teen Vogue*, *Redbook*, *Working Mother*, and *Glamour*.