

The American Counseling Association's "*Counseling Corner*" Weekly Columns

How You Can Help When A Child Faces Disappointment

from the American Counseling Association

It would be wonderful if we could all go through life with no disappointments and have everything turn out just the way we desire. But as adults we've learned life doesn't work that way; we don't always get what we want. And while, as adults, most of us have learned to accept that, for our children it can be a difficult lesson.

Childhood disappointments can come in various form. It may be being passed over for a playground game, or ending up on the losing side in some competition. It could be a best friend moving away or the loss of a pet.

An important part of helping a child cope with disappointment is to listen to the child's story without minimizing or discounting the event. As an adult you may see that your child's best friend now being mad at him or her is just a trivial and probably temporary matter. But for your child the disappointment is not something minor. It can seem like a major tragedy that will significantly change his or her life.

The key is to talk "with" your child about what has happened rather than talking "to" him or her about the experience. Don't try to interrogate your child, but instead give him or her the opportunity to explain what has happened.

Show you understand the disappointment or loss being felt. Do that with statements of understanding, but not explanations of your own life's difficulties. Your goal is not to try and top the disappointment with stories of your own frustrations.

It's also important not to try and make the disappointment disappear with a pleasant experience or reward. Doing so can provide temporary relief by taking your child's mind off the hurt, but can also establish patterns that may be difficult for the child to overcome as he or she grows older.

If a child is displaying a significant change in behavior over a disappointment, make time to allow the child to talk about what has happened and how he or she is feeling. If your child can't or won't talk about what has happened, consider consulting with a professional counselor.

It's important not to ignore or minimize the impact of disappointing events in a child's life. When you do so you simply confirm what many children think all too often about the adults in their lives: "They just don't understand."

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org

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words: 397