



by Karen Stephens

# Disappointment and Dismay: Supporting Kids When They Don't Get What They Want

Despite our best efforts, reality doesn't always meet children's expectations. And probably it shouldn't.

We all hope our children will experience success and happiness. But there are inevitable ups and downs in life children will eventually have to face.

As kids enter the broader social world, they'll soon find that events don't always go their way. And they'll find that others are going to be thinking of their own wishes and wants. (Ask any preschooler, it can be a tough world out there in playgroup!)

Events and experiences will never be completely under a child's control. However, children can choose how they respond to disappointment.

Beginning in the toddler years, prepare children to graciously and competently cope when life lets them down. Here are some ideas to help you toward that goal.

- **Build a strong attachment.** Create a home life and daily schedule that promotes security, predictability, and stability. Trust in others and self flourish when strong, secure attachment is achieved. When we believe others truly care for and love us, disappoint is easier to accept.
- **Spread attention around and encourage everyone's good self-esteem.** Note other's special talents, not just those of children. Compliment character traits — such as helpfulness or patience — rather than giving attention just through gifts or flattery.
- **Help children learn to share center stage.** That prepares children to function well in a social world that will expand from family to faith community, child care, school, and then to work.
- **Build children's "feelings" vocabulary.** From infancy, notice and name feelings, from joy and happiness to sadness and dismay. Building language skills and self-awareness give children tools for managing emotions.
- **Remind children that everyone has feelings and expect them to be respected.** Teach kids to read "body language" that reveals feelings so they understand themselves and others better. For instance, if your child grabs a peer's toy, step in and say, "Look, Zak has tears in his eyes. He's very mad and disappointed. I expect you to hand his toy back to him." As your child calms, suggest he wait a turn for the toy or ask Zak to share without grabbing the toy first. It's important to show children they have alternative choices for behavior.
- **Require that feelings be expressed constructively.** Give children plenty of time and opportunities to sort through feelings. Coach them in ways to share feelings respectfully.

Set limits on how disappointment, anger or frustration can be expressed. Don't reinforce children's crumbling into fits or hurtful outbursts when faced with

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disappointment. Explain that people feel emotions, but they must control what they do. Don't let children hurt themselves or others. Enforce respectful, relevant consequences when children ignore limits.

- ***Provide a shoulder to lean on.*** Be available when children need emotional support coping with disappointment. Empathize with children's feelings. Resist telling them, "It's not a big deal; you'll get over it." Instead mostly listen, nod understandingly and help your child move on to deciding how to resolve disappointment. For instance, if a child is upset that they didn't get to feed the pet at child care that day, help them think of responses, such as asking a teacher for a turn or asking a child to trade turns.
- ***Help children "de-personalize" disappointment.*** Often children think they don't get their way because someone doesn't like them, someone isn't fair, or someone doesn't want them to get what they want. That "someone" may be a peer. But it can also be a parent, teacher — or any other person of authority. If your child takes disappointment as personal rejection, gently point out that sometimes we don't get our way due to unknown circumstances. For instance, if a friend says they won't come over to play, it could be due to relatives visiting or wanting to finish watching a television show.

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- ***Teach delayed gratification.*** Avoid over-indulging children or giving in to their every request or demand. If children come to believe that all their desires will be instantly granted, we set them up for disappointment. Plan simple ways for children to gradually work for toys or special privileges they request. Don't give in to children's whining, back-talk, or emotional blackmail if they express disappointment.
- ***Teach social skills.*** Behaviors such as taking turns, sharing, negotiating, and trading are important team-building skills. Provide children with experiences that lead to mastery of those skills, whether through preschool or organized extra-curricular activities.
- ***Encourage patience.*** Help children understand that everyone has wishes and desires they want fulfilled. Sometimes everyone's wishes can't be met at once. Whether in the park waiting for a swing, or biding time for a turn to talk at the dinner table, give children opportunities to learn their needs will usually be met if they are patient.
- ***Work to model hope, optimism, and persistence in your daily life.*** We all know people who tend to view the cup as either "half-empty" or "half-full." I don't suggest you pretend to be someone you're not, but try to see the bright side of things most often. Your daily model will be a path your child will likely follow.

Actively use "self-talk" out loud so children hear how you manage anxiety or disappointment. Avoid defeatist talk. For instance, talk yourself through a frustrating home chore. Rather than saying, "This clock will never work, I just can't fix anything," try, "This clock breaking down all the time is really frustrating. If I can't fix it, I'll have to take it to the repair shop."

- ***Help children take joy in other's happiness and achievement.*** Encourage compassion, thoughtfulness, and kindness. Help children applaud and take pride in other's endeavors, not just their own.
- ***Encourage and praise children.*** When your child handles disappointment in a respectful, self-controlled manner, express your admiration. Tell them they can be proud.
- ***Acknowledge reality honestly.*** In truth, sometimes we don't get what we want, no matter how much we want or deserve it. We don't have to like it, but sometimes we have to accept it. Children can handle that information. *Especially* if you share it before they encounter a big disappointment.

Tell — *and show* — children that it is how we choose to act in the face of disappointment that defines our character most. Hearing that from you is more influential than you imagine.

- ***Coach children in developing stress management skills.*** Situations that lead to disappointment are stressful. Give children tips on managing stress as they cope with disappointment. For instance, encourage them to take a deep breath, resist impulses to act out, and take time to think through facts and emotions. Let them excuse themselves to another area to regain composure; often their room or a comforting, safe spot outside. Help children discover how to occupy themselves as they calm down, such as playing outdoors, reading a book, listening or dancing to music, reading cartoons, working with play dough or clay, or doing art or craft work. Teach children it's best to respond to disappointment when calm rather than when overwhelmed with emotion.
- ***Use your life to teach.*** Share stories of your own childhood disappointments and how you handled them. You can tell your story during conversation or write your child a letter or even tape record it.
- ***Read a book to start discussion.*** Reading a book can be a gentler, more objective way to discuss tough feelings like disappointment. A classic children's book that both adults and children relate to is *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst (New York: Simon and Schuster's Children's Publishing, 1972). You'll find it at any good children's library or bookstore.

Obviously, helping children learn to cope with disappointment and dismay is a two way street. It requires teaching self-awareness as well as respect for how others feel. It's a fine line to walk, but with your help children can manage it.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.