

PARENT LETTER

Childhood Disappointment and the Recession Holidays:

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"Daddy you didn't read my list, this is not what I wanted, you've ruined this holiday forever!" We do it to ourselves. We become disappointed when our anticipated rewards do not come to fruition. The psychological results of disappointment vary greatly among people. While many of us recover quickly, others become increasingly frustrated, hold blame, or eventually experience sadness resulting in depression.

How Children Experience Disappointment

We all have those moments when things don't go as planned, but for children, who have fewer experiences to help them put things in perspective, being disappointed can seem unbearable. Unlike adults, children, whom are naturally egocentric, have not acquired the tools to regulate their emotions or flexibly respond to unexpected events. As children grow and develop complex thinking skills, the ability to regulate their emotions becomes crucial to their adaptive emotional functioning. During childhood, the development of emotion regulation enhances coping ability.

Adults sometimes interfere with this developmental process. Somehow we became a society that felt children were better when shielded from upsetting situations. We may have

mistakenly believed that it helped their self-esteem and that it was our job as parents to protect them. In her book "Dealing with Disappointment: Helping Kids Cope When Things Don't Go Their Way," Elizabeth Crary says that when children don't develop the ability to soothe themselves, resolve their problems, and understand other's feelings, they are vulnerable to a host of other problems, such as academic trouble, aggression, alcohol and drug addiction, depression and eating disorders.

In reality, by preventing children from facing and dealing with frustrations and disappointments, we are depriving them of opportunities to practice coping and develop attitudes and beliefs that will help them deal with problems in the adult world. One of the keys to functioning socially and emotionally is the ability to deal with disappointment.

Holiday Disappointment

You can't always prepare your children for what life has in store. You also can't protect them from experiencing many of life's disappointments. "Life isn't always fair." This festive season adults across the nation are facing economic hardships and this financial stress is trickling down to kids. For many families the gifts will be downsized. Rather than an abundance of treats and goodies, the emphasis shifts to religious and historic traditions, participating in community programs, and engaging in charitable support. Of course these family activities are deeply meaningful, but this shift might foster negative emotions as children are

likely to experience disappointment about the gifts they receive.

This holiday season parents should remember that saying no is an appropriate parental position. According to Betsy Taylor, who writes about commercialism and parenting, in the long run, kids will be OK not getting what they want, and their disappointment is only momentary. It is far more important that parents don't spend over budget or purchase gifts that are inappropriate. Educator Bonnie Harris says that it is important to show kids that their parents will not compromise family values to avoid upsetting them. It's a good idea to speak to your child about the gifts they anticipate and explain how the celebration may be different this year. Psychologist Kenneth Gelfand, writes about the gains of helping children have more realistic expectations. Parents are encouraged to support and "play up" the benefits of the holiday by reminding them of the religious or family aspects of the season. These are the life lessons that are most beneficial.

Beyond the holidays, parents can help children accept disappointments, learn from them, and move on to an acceptable outcome. It's important that parents don't always make their children's lives emotionally smooth. Instead they should give children the skills they need to choose happiness.

There are several key factors to help foster effective coping skills when faced with disappointment:

- Don't minimize or discount the event. Let children express their feelings without judgment, criticism, or suggesting the issues are trivial.
- Parents can serve as role models in dealing with disappointments by showing kids how to turn unexpected events into positive outcomes.

- Teach your child to take responsibility for their own emotions by asking them to point out something they learned from their disappointing experience.
- An adult can show a child how much they care by teaching a child to calm themselves when they're upset, and show them they have the power to choose to be happy.

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