

HOW TO HELP CHILDREN DEAL WITH DISAPPOINTMENT

By: Christina Frank

Among the many painful effects of the coronavirus pandemic on children is the distress of losing the chance to participate in important events — sports playoffs, significant birthdays, school plays and graduations, or that big family trip. Adults are going through some of the same kinds of difficulties, but they often have plenty of experience processing such challenges. Children, on the other hand, may be experiencing these intense emotions for the first time.

“The disappointments are huge,” says Madeline Levine, PhD, author of *Ready or Not: Preparing Our Kids to Thrive in an Uncertain World*. “We weren’t prepared for this, and we need to be incredibly compassionate.” The specific letdowns will vary from child to child, as will their ability to cope with them, but experts in child development agree that the basic tools for managing disappointment are largely the same across age groups.

1. Listen and Validate: As parents, our first impulse is often to try to fix problems for our children. But there’s no way to fix our current reality. What you can do is listen to and acknowledge children’s frustration and disappointment, says Carey Werley, LCSW, a clinical social worker at the Child Mind Institute. Werley points out that drilling down on the specifics of what your child is most disappointed about is helpful. “We may make some assumptions about what it is about each event,” she says. It’s important to really listen ... and meet them where they’re at. “It’s also important to avoid judging their reactions. Being upset about not getting a prom dress might sound silly to us, but invalidating the pain that our children are feeling (by telling them it’s not a big deal, for example) will only make them feel more isolated. What’s more, focusing on the dress might be a way for your child to process bigger feelings — like fear and sadness around the crisis in general — that they can’t quite confront yet. Instead, emphasize that you hear your child and express your support for how they’re handling this. This situation is genuinely challenging for all of us, and your children are no exception. Reassure them that even though we don’t know what the future holds, you’re proud of them for dealing with the loss of things that were important to them.

2. Provide Perspective: Children, especially younger ones, don’t have the perspective adults have as a result of having lived through our share of disappointments. Instead, children may see things in black and white. “So, a child might be feeling, ‘Oh my god, this is never going to end. I’m never going to go back to school,’” says Lindsay Gerber, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. Again, validating this fear is a good place to start, especially under these unprecedented circumstances. “Saying, ‘You know, I hear it feels like for you like it’s never going to end, and I agree that it can be really hard not knowing when school will start again.’” Avoid false reassurances — you don’t want to give your child unrealistic ideas about what the future will hold, since right now we just don’t know when things like school will resume (or what they’ll look like when they do). At the same time, Werley adds that it’s reasonable to emphasize to kids that, while we don’t know when or how it will happen, eventually our current circumstances will change. They will see friends again and enjoy the activities they are missing right now — even though things are changing, there’s still a lot to look forward to keep doing at home. You might share your own past experiences of change and uncertainty, including how you dealt with those challenges and what the results were.

Also, it's probably best to avoid giving young children a lot of information that will only increase their anxiety, says Dr. Levine. "So, you know, if they ask why are we not seeing Grandma this week, reassure them that you'll see her as soon as you can. Don't say 'we can't see her this week because she's in a very high risk group for coronavirus.'"

3. **Seek Solutions:** You can't change the fact that your child's 10th birthday party is not going to play out as it was supposed to, or that graduation isn't happening in the high school auditorium as planned or you won't be going to a soccer game this summer. But as the pandemic continues, people are becoming increasingly creative at compensating for these losses. Virtual birthday parties and graduations can be celebrated using one of the numerous video chatting apps — or if your daughter is missing being on the soccer team, you might suggest she use this time to practice her skills in the back yard, so she'll be ready to go when things eventually resume. Games held in empty arenas can be streamed together with friends. Werley also suggests reminding children that they're not alone in all of this, which may be comforting. "Everybody who plays sports is missing out on the spring season," she says. "And all the graduating classes are going through the same thing at the same time." You can also encourage your child to talk about what they're going through with their friends — bonding with peers over their shared disappointment can help children put things in perspective and maybe even strengthen friendships.

4. **Give Them a Sense of Control:** By far the hardest and scariest part of this pandemic is that we have no control—over when school will re-open, for example, or what the summer will look like. But we do have some control over how our days look and what would make them easier to tolerate. Working with your child to plan out their days is one way to give them a sense of control over what's happening. How do they want to spend their free time? What projects might they enjoy digging into? Many children will even get excited about giving input into meal planning or household chores. Having a sense of purpose and knowing that you value their ideas can make even disappointing situations a lot easier for children to bear. Plus, having children's buy-in when it comes to daily tasks and schedules can make parents' lives easier, too. You can also model coping behavior by telling your child what your go-to coping skills are and helping them come up with some of their own, Dr. Levine says. You and your child are already demonstrating coping skills every day, just by getting out of bed and going through your days as a family. Ask yourself: what are the tools that help you and your child do this? For you, maybe it's checking in with extended family, cooking meals you enjoy, or taking care of pets. Coping might look similar for your children, or they might use their own particular skills. Maybe they value watching a funny movie at the end of the day, or having their favorite flavor of ice cream, or writing their feelings down in a journal. "Talk about the box of coping skills you have [and then ask them] 'What helps you the most?'"

5. **Have Faith in Them:** While the disappointments related to the coronavirus crisis are on a much bigger scale than the ones we all experience in normal life, the fact is that children have to learn how to live with disappointment, says Dr. Levine. Remind your children of things they've tolerated before, she says, whether it was not being cast in the school play, getting a lower-than-expected grade, or losing a big game. Let them know that even though this situation is different, they can use some of the same skills to get through it. "Ideally, it's a succession of small disappointments," says Dr. Levine. "Hopefully this experience will make that muscle of tolerating disappointment more robust, says Dr. Levine. "I think that's the message that parents need to be aware of, which is some iteration of, 'I think you can handle this. I know it's really hard, but you got this.'"