



Not in the cards

How to help your child deal with disappointment

BY LISA BENDALL

WHAT KID HASN'T FACED a letdown? Whether it's losing the big hockey game, missing a party or realizing she's really not getting a horse for her birthday, disappointment is a part of life—at any age. And as much as you may want to shield your child, it's important that she experience disappointment, so she can develop skills to handle it.

"Disappointment is part of what teaches a child resiliency," says Celia Osenton, a parent educator in Calgary. "Resiliency means being able to cope with whatever life throws at you. If we've been protecting the child, she may not be able to cope."

So how do you help your child understand that she may not always get what she wants? Here are five steps to try.

1 acknowledge his feelings Winnipeg mom Mireille Theriault says that when her seven-year-old son Mathieu didn't get the birthday toy he'd been yearning for, his disappointment broke her heart. He'd seen the remote-controlled, all-terrain vehicle on TV, but at \$100, it was outside the budget. "He was just so crushed. He was really biting back the tears," she recalls. "I let him know that I appreciated how much he really wanted it, but explained that it was just a bit on the expensive side."

What helps is when parents validate their kids' feelings, says Dr. Staci Illsley, a Vancouver psychologist who specializes in children and adolescents. When you tell your child, "Wow, you must be really disappointed," or ask "Are you feeling sad?" you're helping her identify her own emotions so she can better deal with unwanted feelings. "You're laying the foundation for coping skills," says Dr. Illsley.

2 tell her it's normal Explain that disappointments are a crummy part of everyone's life. "Their world is somewhat self-centred, and they think that what's happening to them is not happening to anybody else," Osenton points out. Share your own experience when you didn't land the job you wanted, or you had to cancel an event you were looking forward to. Just don't minimize or downplay what she's going through.

3 suggest solutions When your kid's fairweather friend rejects him as a school project partner, offer ideas about what he

can say or do next time, like telling his friend that she's making him feel bad. Or ask him what he might do if it happens again. "That will empower him and make him feel he has more control over the situation," Osenton says. But don't rush to come up with a fast fix. "If we raise children thinking that every time somebody lets them down, mom or dad will solve the problem, then we've given them the wrong impression."

4 bring the lessons to light Theriault admits she eventually caved and bought her son his dream toy, mostly because his original gift did not include a battery pack that was difficult to find, but also because of the maturity he showed when he didn't get the remote-control vehicle. But then came another disappointment: It didn't transform Mathieu's life the way he'd expected. Now he barely plays with it. No matter—Theriault plans to remind him of this experience the next time he's drawn in by advertising. "We'll say, listen, there's a toy sitting in the basement that you wanted more than anything." There may be other take-away lessons as well, says Dr. Illsley. For instance, later on you can praise your child for managing her disappointment well. "That brings awareness to how the child can cope: 'Yeah, I did it. I can handle this.'"

5 get him to refocus You may think you're a top-notch parent because you've spent days listening to your child wail about his disappointment. But there's a limit to how long it should be dragged out. "We can't dwell on the fact that we aren't going to Disney World," says Osenton. "Otherwise, it will be a chant at the breakfast table for the next three weeks." Instead, acknowledge that the child wants to go to Disney World and so do you, then suggest a plan of action on how the family can make it possible in the next few years, or talk about great things you can do in town or options that are within your budget, and let your child decide. When you teach your kid to let it go, says Osenton, "you're teaching them that we do need to move on."

Lisa Bendall is a Toronto writer and mom who has not yet won the Giller Prize for excellence in Canadian fiction but has learned to cope with the disappointment.