

Little Bumps in the Road

I have secretly been wishing that my 11 year old son experience just a little “bump in the road.” You see, he has excelled in every sport he has played. He has made all the top teams and his teams have won their divisions time and time again. Of course I enjoy watching him win, but I secretly have been hoping that he experiences a small setback soon so that he learns to cope with disappointment and loss before he gets any older. I thought he would get that chance when he asked me if he could join a bowling league last year. Finally, I thought he would experience a “good loss” (pardon the oxymoron), given that he has little experience bowling, and the team he would be playing on was not all that strong. To my surprise, yet again, my son’s team came in first place! How did this happen? It seems that the bowling league gave out handicap points, so even though my son’s team had the lowest pins knocked down, they still took first place. He won the trophy, but was robbed of that bump in the road that I was feeling he needed.

Children need to experience little disappointments, little “bumps in the road”. I know it is heartbreaking and unpleasant to see your child disappointed. We all at some point wish we could rush in and relieve their disappointment or even try to prevent any conflicts from occurring. But if you totally protected your child from all life’s little bumps, what would happen when they were expected to function as an adult? Children with no experience solving life’s little setbacks have a much harder time coping with life’s big ones. As I’ve heard it described, it would be like setting them up to run a marathon without ever letting them train for it. Avoiding problems deprives children of the learning experiences necessary to develop important skills. Stumbling blocks are opportunities to improve and grow. Children need to learn to pick themselves up, keep working hard, and pursue their goals despite setbacks. These are resiliency traits important to success in life.

So where can you start? First, take a close look at how you handle your child’s conflicts. Some of your reactions may be robbing them of opportunities to develop coping skills. Have you ever tried to come to the rescue and solve a problem for them? Did you ever call another child’s parent when your child complained of hurt from another? Have you tried to lavish your child with gifts when they were upset about a situation? Have you reacted with strong negative emotions when they’ve shared their disappointment instead of focusing them on moving forward? Did you ever place blame on your child’s peers or teachers whenever behavior difficulties at school arose? Have you ever portrayed your child as a victim when your child was upset without examining what, if any role your child played in the situation?

You are certainly not alone if you have reacted in any of the above mentioned ways. However, here are some other, healthier ways to help your child get through a setback, which may be more productive in encouraging future resiliency:

- 1. Let them vent and empathize with their feelings. Rephrase and summarize their thoughts so they know you understand what they are going through.**

- You can even give them examples of your own similar experiences. Never trivialize their feelings and always show them unconditional love.
2. Teach them that setbacks are normal and expected parts of life and what matters is how they react to them. It's really ok to fail sometimes. The situation may not be what they desired or hoped for, but it's normal and it will be ok. The focus should always be on the effort and attitude that they put into doing something.
 3. Teach them positive ways to self soothe instead of trying to find them a consolation prize. This could be taking deep breaths or a long walk. It could be drawing pictures about a disappointing event or writing their feelings down in a diary. They may even feel better just talking to you or a close friend.
 4. Help your child find the wins among the losses. For example, even if they lost a game, have them examine if they played well and how much fun they had. Challenge and separate their feelings from the facts. The feeling that everyone is better than them after a disappointment should be replaced with the fact that some people are better than them and some people are worse. Everybody excels at different things.
 5. Focus them on moving forward and staying optimistic about the future. Help them to identify why the setback occurred, if there was anything they could have done about it, and help them move on to their next goal. Learning from mistakes and persevering is a key focus in dealing with disappointment. See if they can brainstorm ways to deal with similar situations in the future. Once they have worked out their own solution with your guidance, they will feel more confident in handling future conflicts.

In a very heartfelt way, I wish all of our children “little bumps in the road” in order to prepare them to deal with obstacles they will have to face as adults. We have to teach our children to deal with pain and discomfort because that is a fact of life. So may all our children fall into little potholes to avoid hitting the tree. May they experience some wrong turns to recognize the right ones. Let's be their guide, not their savior. You and I will be here to help them get them through it, so that they will become fully competent, resilient adults.

“Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm.” -Winston Churchill

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