

Responding To Negative Emotions

by John Hoffman

Frustration is a part of life and children do need to learn how to manage it. The first way they learn is by having parents help them deal with frustration. Here are some in-the-moment strategies that may be useful.

- **Acknowledge children's frustration.** One thing that can make frustration feel even worse is to have an adult dismiss or belittle the feeling. So, instead of saying something like, "Don't make such a fuss," or "Just try harder," say something like, "I know this is hard for you and you're really frustrated. I get frustrated too, sometimes. Would you like some help?"
- **Don't feel you always have to fix it right away.** It is so hard to watch our children be distressed that we want to make it better as quickly as possible. Sometimes we need to do that, of course. But if we always just step in and make it better, or do the task for them, children won't learn the important skill of managing and working through frustrating situations. Try to be supportive rather than always making the problem simply go away. Sometimes all they need is just a helping hand on one little step.
- **Encourage children to take time-outs.** Sometimes children get so frustrated that no matter how hard they try, the situation just keeps getting worse. That's partly because intense frustration drains a child's energy making it even harder to think clearly, focus, or problem solve. Children (or adults!) will be better able to deal with their task or problem when they have had a break that allows their feelings of frustration to subside. Keep in mind that when children are really tired or over-stressed they are much more prone to frustration.
- **Help them problem solve.** Rather than getting into a conflict about whether or not your child "should" be frustrated, help him or her identify what the specific problem is, and then get him or her talking about possible solutions. Try to get the child to be a true participant in the process rather than always relying on you to find the solution.
- **Avoid unnecessary frustration.** Try not to assign tasks or set challenges that are too difficult for your child. Think of it like climbing a ladder. We want the next rung to be within their reach, and sometimes they may need just a little support to reach that next rung. But they need to feel that they reached it because of the effort they made.