

Strategies for Helping Children Deal with Negative Emotions

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by John Hoffman

One of the most important life skills a child can ever learn is how to withstand and recover from negative emotions.

Bad feelings are part of life. As much as we'd like to avoid them, we're all going to have them. And, in fact, negative emotions like disappointment, anger, jealousy, frustration, and sadness are often realistic and appropriate responses to some of the experiences we all have. Sometimes we learn from them. Guilt, for example, often spurs people on to improve their behaviour or to not make the same mistake twice.

However, bad feelings, especially long-lasting ones, are a drain on a child's energy. A parent's job is to give children the understanding and skills that will help them recover from bad feelings so they can move on to more positive feelings. How do we do this?

- By showing our children that we accept and understand the way they feel, especially when they feel badly. For example, when a child is upset, try to say things like, "I know you're upset about breaking your balloon," rather than, "Oh, don't make such a fuss. It's just a balloon."
- By helping children learn to express their feelings in words. We express feelings instinctively through facial expressions, body language, and actions. But learning to talk about feelings helps children deal with their bad feelings a little faster and makes them less likely to lash out in anger.
- By comforting children when they feel bad. In order for children to learn how to comfort themselves (and others), they must first have the experience of being comforted by adults—over and over and over again.
- By gently reminding children that negative feelings are a normal part of life, but that we can recover from them and feel good again. This can help children maintain a glimmer of hopefulness, even when they are in the depths of disappointment, sadness, or anger.
- By teaching children strategies for coping with and recovering from negative emotions. We do this by modelling healthy coping strategies, teaching coping strategies to our children, and reminding them of strategies that helped them in the past: "Remember that time you were upset about losing the championship game? We went and made an obstacle course in the back yard, and after that you felt better."

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Children's emotional states are very closely tied to how they feel physically. If your child is having trouble managing his emotions, don't forget to look at his physical state. If he is tired, hungry, all wound up physically or lacking in physical energy, addressing the physical need (extra sleep, a snack, a calming bath or massage, or some physical activity) can sometimes be more helpful than trying to talk to him about how he feels.