

Learning to be OK with “Plan B”: Helping your Child to Develop Resiliency

As we know all too well, kids do get upset when things don't go their way. As parents, we don't like to see our kids get upset, and some of us will do just about anything to make sure that the tears don't fall and the wailing does not begin.....including turning ourselves inside out to keep them happy. We can say to ourselves that we are being “nice” parents when we do this and we can feel as though we are saving ourselves and our children from feeling upset...which is good, right?

The problem is, when we approach our child's discomfort or disappointment like this on a regular basis, we only save us both from feeling upset in that moment while setting up a pattern which robs our child from developing a fundamentally important skill: resiliency.

Our children will encounter upset, disappointment, discomfort and frustration in their lives, even if we work really hard to make sure this doesn't happen. What may be counter intuitive is that in the effort to rescue our kids from these situations, we make sure that they are LESS prepared to meet them effectively when they inevitably arise. I have heard that university professors are calling the wave of recent students “teacups”. *They are used to being served and are so fragile they break at the first knock they experience.* Why do kids of today lack psychological muscle? In our quest to keep them happy and calm, we have not taught our kids the skills they need to build resiliency. There are many ways to help to develop resiliency. Our reaction to our children's distress is a place to start. Use these four steps:

1. ALLOW KDIS TO HAVE THEIR EMOTIONS

When children are upset, it makes sense that they experience difficult emotions. Let them have those, even if it means a temper tantrum. Refrain from taking on your children's upset...these are their emotions not yours. Squat down to their level and let them know that you understand that they are really disappointed/mad/frustrated/embarrassed/unhappy. You don't have to agree that their emotion is justified in this moment; you just need to recognize that they are feeling badly...and listen. Offer a hug and sincere empathy, acknowledging that they are feeling something hard to feel. Refrain from fixing it for them. Just BE with them. (Do remember that you need to respect the situation as well as yourself and your child. If your child is having a temper tantrum somewhere like the mall or the park or your own house, then hanging out and patiently waiting at a child's eye level until they finish is fine. If you are somewhere where your child's temper tantrum is creating disruption for others, firmly but kindly pick him up and bring him to a place where he can finish in privacy)

2. SHOW FAITH THAT THEY WILL GET THROUGH THIS

When we rescue our kids from feeling upset, our kids get this message: “Wow, strong emotions must be really, really horrible. My Mum clearly thinks that feeling this is too difficult for me. I am not capable of this” They may also figure out a strategy. “Dad feels really uncomfortable when I am upset, so all I need to do to get what I want here is to start to get upset.” These messages are received at the subconscious level but neither

one of them helps to develop a resilient child. Instead, show your child that you have complete faith that he will get through it:

“You are feeling awful now, I know. And I know that you will get through this. You are strong.”

3. TALK ABOUT PLAN B

When your child is NOT upset, introduce the idea of “Plan B”. Tell them that a Plan A is what you really WANT to happen. Plan B is what you might do when Plan A is not going to work. Bring up times when you were disappointed and didn’t get what you wanted or things did not go your way. Tell them about what you did *instead*, when your Plan A didn’t work. Then, bring up a time when THEY were disappointed in the recent past. Ask what a “Plan B” might have been. We ALL have to learn to be OK with giving up on Plan A and finding a Plan B at one time or another. There are examples in picture books and movies and real life. Point them out to your kids. Once kids “get” the idea, they have fun finding them and pointing them out to you.

4. AFTER LETTING THEM HAVE THEIR EMOTIONS AND SHOWING EMPATHY AND FAITH, INVITE THEM TO HELP CHOOSE A PLAN B

Sometimes, you can get right to helping your child figure out what he CAN do, when what he wants to do is not an option. However, children who are upset often cannot jump into problem solving. Wait until they are calm then invite them to help choose a Plan B. You can offer 2 or 3 (no more) ideas and ask them what they think. Sometimes, you’ll just have to choose an option yourself, and go with it, but as your kids get used to this process and feel more comfortable with their own resilience, they will begin to engage more (and more calmly) in thinking of and choosing a Plan B.

When you use these four steps, not only have you helped your children to develop resiliency, you have also helped them to develop:

- Emotional intelligence
- Empathy
- Patience
- Faith in themselves
- Trust in the world
- Creative thinking
- Problem solving
- Cooperation
- Response Flexibility
- Confidence

Many times your child’s frustration and anger may be in response to you kindly and firmly enforcing rules and boundaries that are set up in your home. When you use these steps, and keep your boundaries and rules intact, you are also allowing your child to develop trust in you, as well as a sense of security and faith in the predictability of his world. These things provide deep comfort, despite what the temper tantrum may seem to say to you in the moment.

You have great love for your kids and the temptation to rescue them is strong. Instead, show your love by helping them to become the competent, capable, resilient adults you want them to become. Jane Nelsen tells us that “the only way a child can develop his disappointment muscle is to be disappointed, and learn that he can get through that disappointment.” Instead of taking away your children’s “opportunities” to feel disappointed, be there with them as they experience their emotions (without telling them “you are OK” when they clearly are not feeling OK), show empathy and faith in their ability to weather the emotional storm then help them come up with a “Plan B.” Instead of showing love by rescuing your children, show it by teaching them the tools they need to competently rescue themselves and carry on in strength and confidence.