

# Grandma Says

## DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENT

In the past month, disappointment has hit us all. Sometimes big - graduations canceled, to say nothing of proms, weddings and spring break plans - and sometimes lesser events - soccer tournaments, class plays, dance recitals.

In my own family, one granddaughter was thrilled to be studying for a semester in Milan until her university called her home after one month, thankfully healthy.

The other, anticipating a busy spring at her university, is now in her parents' living room doing online courses, along with thousands of others. Such stories are multiplied around the country.

These disappointments may even have been a little easier to accept, since there was the notion that the distresses were equally distributed, shared by thousands of others. We are all in this together, sharing both the anxiety and the many disappointments.

But when it comes right down to it, our kids have not had a lot of experience in dealing with disappointment as a fact of life. And a lot of that is our fault.

When parents began to believe that the job description of parent included ensuring that our children were always happy, we laid the foundation for inexperience dealing with disappointment.

Parents have tried to fix things so carefully that disappointment could never enter the picture.

Consider, for example, the concept of score-less soccer games, lest children on the losing team be disappointed. Or the mom who whips up a huge alternative plan so that her child won't feel left out of a neighborhood birthday party.

If children have never been permitted to feel the anger and sadness that comes from disappointment, they have not been able to develop their own disappointment muscles.

So what's the helpful parental stance for helping kids who are experiencing disappointment?

**1. Empathize** and give them the right to experience the sense of loss. In lots of the examples of current disappointments, it is easy to empathize. After all, graduation is

a once-in-a-lifetime thing, likely, and has been highly anticipated. There is a huge sense of letdown, feeling gypped, and anger without a direction.

Kids have a right to be upset for a while. It does *stink*. It isn't *fair*. Even in ordinary times, even if you think it is no big deal - there will be another dance recital someday - a child's disappointment is now and real, and the feeling of sadness ought not to be rationalized away.

**2. Give them time** to come to acceptance. Some kids, by the nature of their temperaments, will bounce back sooner than others. Others may need guidance towards outlets for their emotions - suggest drawing a picture or writing about the event that never took place.

If there is a possible alternative - say making a video of the dance for the recital, in full costume, to distribute to friends and family - help with that plan.

In any case, let the child work through the feelings and the sense of loss in their time and in their own way, with your support.

**3. But don't let them wallow** in the "poor me" trough of despair. Life will have many, many more disappointments, and the big task is learning to keep going, to focus on the next day. Help them find meaningful ways to help others and fill their empty time. Be matter of fact about it, after a decent interval.

**4. Resist the temptation** to point out that others', even your own, disappointment is greater. As we communicate with friends and family, children will absorb the ideas that many have had such losses, without your having to hammer it home.

Nobody asked for this dreadful virus and its disruption of normal life. But strength comes from learning to deal with disappointments.