

Facing Hard Things with Kids

Parents have a deep desire to protect their children from hardship. If we had our way, their lives would be full of nothing but joy and laughter.

And yet, parents are responsible for teaching their children to cope with setbacks. Life is, after all, a series of successes and disappointments—and all the learning that happens in between.

Children are inclined to feel that any bump in the road is a catastrophe. Our turning off the television may be met with a full scale meltdown. Parents must avoid letting children think we agree with them in their tragic perspective.

But sometimes children really must endure things that are unpleasant, painful or even terrifying. Children are better prepared for such experiences if parents have helped to strengthen them for difficulties.

Dr. Lillian Katz of the University of Illinois says that parents can support their child's competence for coping with life. Dr. Katz suggests that parents give children a strategy to build on their own successes, and celebrate with them when they endure hardship well.

When children face some difficult thing—like an immunization—instead of telling them it will be easy, parents can acknowledge that it may not be entirely pleasant, but that the child has the resources to deal with it and they will all be so proud when it is over.

A parent might remind a child, *“Remember that other really hard thing you did? You hated it, but you got through it and then it was over and BOY were you ever glad! Well, this is going to be JUST LIKE THAT.”*

Dr. Katz suggests that parents “give children something to put in their emotional pocket.” When children are dreading a hard time, we can assure them that we will be thinking of them at that time. *“I know you don't like riding the bus to preschool, but when you get on the bus, remember that I will be thinking of you right at that time.”* In this way, parents can nurture their children even when they are not present.

Most children face only small hardships that feel tragic, like not getting chosen for the team. But I know a little girl who has faced painful treatments in her battle with a serious illness. She has a remarkable outlook. Her parents have nurtured in her a resiliency for coping. She remains sunny and doesn't see herself as a victim.

Her medical prognosis is excellent. And I would say her prognosis for dealing with the rest of her life is excellent as well.

Unfortunately, there are no short cuts to building character. Children develop perspective through the careful nurturing of parents who usher them through painful times. Parents have the opportunity to pave the way for hope for their children's future.

