

# This is our season of coaching our children through disappointment

By Kristen Howerton

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A couple of weeks ago, in the midst of their pandemic summer boredom, my kids asked if they could dig a hole in the front yard. Did we need a hole? No, we did not. Did I let them dig a hole just to give them something to do? I sure did.

All four of them, ages 11-15, set out with shovels. It became a hilarious group project for the better part of a week. When they felt like they'd dug down far enough, they set up lawn chairs in the hole. It is now a weird sort of fort where they hang out. It's probably one of the first times since most of them became teenagers that I've seen my kids truly "play" together. It was a little bright spot in what has felt like a dark groundhog's day existence at home. As silly as it was, it lifted their spirits, gave them a sense of collaboration that has been absent for a while, and gave them a feeling of purpose and completion.

Of my four kids, two are athletes and two are theater kids. All four have had their respective activities canceled for the foreseeable future. We are most likely looking at another year of distance learning while I work from home — or try and fail at working from home while supervising school. It sucks. It's frustrating. It's mind-numbingly exhausting. We are all disappointed. *This is going to ruin their mental health*, I think to myself.

But will it? I'm finding that it's important to distinguish between things that are disappointing and things that will actually negatively impact my kids' mental health. As a therapist, I know that a lot of that hinges on the narratives I model for my kids.

We are a long way from comprehending how the pandemic is impacting our mental health, but most of us are experiencing increased anxiety, anger and exhaustion. There is a heavy burden of grief that many of us don't even know how to name. We've lost our habits, our church gatherings, our corporate gatherings for art and theater and sports. It feels like we've lost a little of our humanity as well as our community.

In the midst of these losses, I'm struggling with that temptation to feel fatalistic, to fall into narratives that play through my mind like: "Everything is ruined" and "My kids are going to be traumatized." I'm a catastrophizer — this kind of dreadful future-casting comes easy for me. If I'm not careful, I can project it onto my kids. And so I know it's really important to sit with my kids in the pain of this season's disappointments. Where we go from here, and what meaning I help them extrapolate, is just as important.

We can give our kids one of two perspectives. That of victimhood: that they've lost things they're entitled to, that they should remain outraged, and that they will be forever scarred by their current losses. Or that of empowerment: narratives of delayed gratification, of resiliency, of grieving and moving on, and of finding new meaning and new coping skills.

We don't need to suppress our kids' natural responses to what they are losing right now. We need to acknowledge and work through their real feelings, and give them permission to feel fear, doubt, rage and sadness, just as we do.

But beyond that, we also need to give our kids hope. We need to help them see this as a temporary season, to give them some sense that their world, while being profoundly changed, will not be forever marred. In a society steeped in privilege, we've been taught to run from suffering at all costs. But if we've lived long enough, we also know that suffering and disappointment are inevitable.

In my own life, I've experienced great losses, and I have learned that challenge and adversity can be a catalyst for resilience. It doesn't mean that I don't still grieve those losses, but I can see how the periods of life where things did not go as I expected, even in devastating ways, taught me to be more flexible, to let go of trying to control outcomes, and to learn to brush myself off and find a new plan when mine wasn't panning out.

We now have the opportunity to coach our children through a season of disappointment. And while it's decidedly difficult, it's also an incredible opportunity while they're still in our care to teach them how to weather the future storms that life will bring.

In my family, we are adapting, and finding that there are ways to attend to our mental health within our new reality. It's not a lost cause. But if we believe it is, our kids will feel like it is, too. We have to find the right balance.

It's a tricky thing to help our kids build resiliency without falling into toxic positivity: that unhelpful precept that tells us we need to police our responses to life so that we always remain positive and upbeat, i.e. happiness is a choice and we are failing if we don't choose it at every moment.

We can all find ways to be active and to find connection. In a world where we face so many things we cannot control, we *can* control how we react and what meaning we give this time. It can help us, and it can help our kids, if we will just be proactive in making choices about the things in our grasp — choosing new habits, new hobbies, new narratives for this time. That might look like letting go of what parenting/ school/childhood looked like before the pandemic. It might also look like building something new, and we can be hopeful about that.

As we talk to our kids about this time, we may also need to make shifts that protect their mental health, and ours.

We may choose to *lower our expectations*: For ourselves. For our kids. For our job. For the cleanliness of our home. For the productivity of our days.

We may choose to *opt out of rigid expectations* for grades and opt in to discovering our children's own learning skills.

We may choose to *opt out of our pre-pandemic goals* and opt into new ones that better match our resources — mentally, spiritually, emotionally and financially — and the world in which we find ourselves.

For now, in all this crazy uncertainty, let's opt into being as gentle as we can with ourselves and with those we love. Mental health is important. But it does not need to hinge on the disappointments and losses of this season. Instead, it

can hinge on how we help our loved ones process those disappointments, and then pivot to helping them get their needs met in new and creative ways.

That may look like digging what seems to be a pointless hole in your front yard, but in fact becomes a place for community and togetherness.

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