

CHILDREN'S BIRTHDAY PARTIES – CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION OR ALIENATION?

Practical strategies to help children deal with rejection and disappointment.

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It's funny how the seemingly small things cause the greatest angst for kids – a sneer from a sibling; a curt remark from a teacher or being left off a classmate's birthday party invitation list can leave a child feeling insecure, even sad.

While some issues such as sibling disputes are perennial others such as helping children manage the disappointment of missing a friend's birthday party is a more pressing concern for primary-aged children right now. In fact, according to many teachers and parents I meet many children's birthday parties are creating rifts between children, leading to alienation for those left off the party list.

Issue invitations with sensitivity

It's a good life lesson for a child to learn that they can't be invited to everything. But not being invited to a party shouldn't make a child feel isolated or humiliated. Disappointment is normal; humiliation and alienation are not acceptable. Which means children need to give out invitations while being mindful of the feelings of others. This is where good parenting comes in. We need to remind, and if necessary teach children, how to give out invitations sensitively being mindful of the possible disappointment that some children will experience. Likewise all children who are going to a party should be reminded of their social obligations to all classmates, not just those who are in the "in" crowd. Tolerance and social graces are the foundations of a civil society and these lessons start in primary school.

Helping kids handle disappointment

One of the keys to functioning socially and emotionally is the ability to deal with disappointment and rejection.

So whether it is a case of not receiving an invitation to a classmate's birthday party or a school playground snub, most children experience some type of rejection from their peers throughout childhood. One study found that even popular children were rejected about one quarter of the time when they approached children in school.

Most children recover from such rejection. They move on and form constructive, worthwhile relationships but some children need help. They often take rejection personally, blaming themselves. As a parent it is useful to challenge children's unhelpful thinking and encourage them to look for new friendship opportunities. Parents can help children understand that rejection may happen for any number of reasons that are unrelated to them.

In the course of a school day children will meet with a number of challenges and even setbacks. They may struggle with some schoolwork. They may not do well in a test and they may not be picked for a game that they wanted to play. Children grow stronger when they overcome their difficulties. The challenge for parents is to build and maintain children's confidence to help them get through the rough times.

One way to help children deal with rejection and disappointment is to talk through problems or difficulties, recognising and accepting their feelings. Talk about various scenarios, discussing possible outcomes. The age of the child will determine the amount of detail. Keep things simple and avoid burdening a younger child with concepts he or she doesn't understand.

Your attitude can make a huge difference to how a child reacts. If you see rejection or disappointments as problems then your child will be

hamstrung by this view. See them as challenges then your child will, in all likelihood, will pick up your upbeat view and deal with disappointments easily. After all, confidence is catching!

To help children handle rejection and disappointment try the following four strategies:

1. **Model optimism.** Watch how you present the world to children, as they will pick up your view.

2. **Tell children how you handle disappointment and rejection.** Not only is it reassuring for children to know that their parents understand how they feel but they can learn a great deal by how their parents handle situations.

3. **Help children recognise times in the past when they bounced back from disappointment.** Help them recognise those some strategies can be used again.

4. **Laugh together.** Humour is a great coping mechanism. It helps put disappointment in perspective. It helps them understand that things will get better. They always do.