

When Things Don't Go Well, Help Your Child Succeed

Sometimes children will come home from school or extracurricular activities feeling a sense of failure. It's natural for parents to try to soften the blow with comments like, "It was just a bad day" or "You did well -- they just didn't understand." However, there's a better approach: view failures and setbacks as learning experiences.

Yes, it's important to support and encourage your child, but remain neutral and find out about the experience from your child's perspective.

The goal is to understand the real meaning behind the child's feelings and actions about the situation, the family life specialist explained.

Your child may be viewing the failure as letting you down or as proof that he or she will never succeed. Affirm your child's feelings, and listen without judging. Don't say 'I think you should....' Instead, ask your child to tell you what happened or what he or she could do differently next time.

Make sure children understand it's OK to make mistakes. Mistakes are a part of life — share some of your own. Give your child space and time to think about the incident and begin to understand why it happened. Then, encourage him or her to try again.

Make trying again a "safe" experience. Wait until he or she is ready, but don't wait too long. Break the task into small goals and work together to accomplish each goal.

For example, a teen learning to drive may have had a bad experience. Allow time for him or her to think it over, and then together make a plan for success. To build confidence, be sure to "set up" a success, such as driving in low traffic areas to avoid major pressures. Then acknowledge the effort.

Follow up each attempt and small success with words of encouragement. You might say, 'You can be proud of how you handled that,' or 'you really solved that problem well.'

If the situation is school related, meet with the child's teachers and work together to create a plan for success. For example, if you agree to help your child review spelling words, create an environment at home that is conducive for homework — a regular study time, a place that is away from lots of activity and interruption, and a review time when you and your child have energy to complete the task successfully. Make sure you follow-up on your end by monitoring your child's progress at school and acknowledging his or her efforts and accomplishments one-on-one at home.

For more information on parenting, follow the Home and Family link from the Iowa State University Extension home page, www.extension.iastate.edu.