



## Let Down

### How to deal with disappointment from your children

BY JULIE HANKS, MSW, LCSW

**G**azing into your new baby's eyes, you are *positive* that you will raise the best-behaved, most brilliant, talented and beautiful child the world has ever known. Soon sleepless nights, crying spells and picky eating challenge that dream of having the "perfect" child. Welcome to the first dose of unmet parental expectations.

As your child grows, so does her desire to separate from you. Inevitably, she will challenge what you think is best for her and you will feel disappointed, hurt or even devastated. Whether it's a young child misbehaving at school, a teen's substance abuse or an adult child's marital infidelity, here are six tips to help you answer life's most difficult parenting question: What will I do when my child disappoints me?

### 1. Feel your feelings

Pretending that everything is fine may work for the short-term, but it's not a healthy long-term coping strategy. Allow yourself to experience the full range of your emotions. It's helpful to think of emotions as "*e-motion*" or "energy in motion" — the energy needs to go somewhere. Whether you write in a journal, talk with family members or take a walk, allow yourself time to experience emotions and move through disappointment. Pain can teach us lessons we would never choose to learn but wouldn't trade for anything.

### 2. Seek support

Women need other women! Talking with other women who have experienced similar disappointments can ease the burden. Even if the situation with your child doesn't change, talking to other women who've "been there" provides invaluable emotional support to manage disappointment.

### 3. Learn to listen

Choose to put your feelings on hold and choose to listen to your child's perspective in a non-judgmental way, without taking on responsibility for her choices. Disappointments

can transform into opportunities for deeper understanding of your child's heart.

### 4. Refrain from rescuing

Although rescuing your child provides temporary feelings of relief for both of you, it robs her of experiencing the painful cause and effect of choices. Experiencing consequences is one of the greatest gifts you can give your child because it contributes to the development of maturity, responsibility, self-awareness and empathy for others.

### 5. Modify meanings

You may be unknowingly creating pain by the meaning you assign to a given situation. For example, if you discover your teen is drinking, you can make it mean, "This is awful! I'm a failure as a parent" or you can make it mean, "Something's going on with my child. I want to understand why they are making this choice." To identify the meaning of a situation, write down the facts and then write down at least three meanings for the situation. Choose to focus on the meanings that are more hopeful. Taking a step back can help you feel differently even though the situation hasn't changed.

### 6. Live your life

You've made sacrifices for your child their entire lives. Worry and concern can feel consuming when your child experiences difficulties and vicarious suffering makes it easy to put your own life on hold. Unfortunately, when you stop taking caring of yourself, you can create more stress for your child. It's important to continue doing things that bring you joy. Self-care allows you to maintain the physical and emotional resources that enable you to continue loving and supporting your struggling child. ❖

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