

Parenting: Frustration in Children: Aarrgghh!!

How do your children deal with frustration?

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Frustration may be your children's most significant obstacle to achieving their goals. We all have experienced the feeling of frustration when we're not able to do something as we pursue our goals; we feel stuck, we get uptight, and we have difficulty focusing. The best way I can describe the feeling is: AAARRGGHH!! It is a truly infuriating feeling, even more so for children because they are less equipped to deal with frustration constructively.

But what is frustration precisely and what causes it? Simply put, frustration arises when the path toward a goal is blocked. Most people think of frustration as a bad emotion, but it is actually more complex than that. The fact is that frustration is hard wired into us and has tremendous adaptive value. Frustration starts as a good emotion because when we get frustrated, we are motivated to remove the obstacle that is blocking our path toward our goals. We try harder and that extra effort frequently results in clearing that path enabling us to continue pursuit of our goals.

Negative Emotional Chain Unfortunately, if, despite our best efforts, we can't overcome those roadblocks, frustration can become a destructive emotion. In fact, if frustration isn't dealt with effectively and quickly, it can trigger what I call the "negative emotional chain" in which frustration leads to a descent into a series of truly unhealthy emotions.

If frustration isn't dealt in a productive way, it can morph into anger. Most people also believe that anger is a bad emotion, but, like frustration, it too has both positive and negative sides. Anger starts out as being helpful because it too is motivating. When children are angry, they want to go after the thing that is causing their anger. Unfortunately, for most tasks that your children are involved in, for example, school, games, sports, or the performing arts, anger swiftly becomes a harmful emotion. The feelings of anger are like those of frustration, but with the volume turned up considerably. Children's bodies become tense so, if they are involved in a physical activity, they lose their coordination and the quality of their efforts decline. Their focus narrows so much that they miss important cues necessary to perform their best. And children's thinking becomes clouded by the anger, so they aren't able to think clearly or make good decisions.

If your children aren't able to clear the obstacles from their path at this point, their emotions shift to the final stage of the negative emotional chain; they experience despair. They have tried and tried and tried and still can't remove the barriers, so the natural thing to do is quit. What's the point of continuing to try if nothing they do works? The unfortunate outcome of the conclusion of the negative emotional chain is immediate failure to achieve their goals.

It has been my experience that if children move from frustration to anger, continued efforts that day usually fail. And if children experience the negative emotional chain on a regular basis--sinking repeatedly into despair--they will likely lose their motivation and be unwilling to make a sustained effort in the future. With each descent down the negative emotional chain, children come to believe that their actions have little effect and they will progressively lose confidence in their ability to achieve their goals.

Your Role How your children deal with frustration is influenced by how you react to it. If you model an unhealthy response to the frustration you experience in your life, for example, with impatience or anger, they may learn that this is an appropriate way to deal with frustration. If you are calm, positive, and look for solutions when you get frustrated, your children will likely adopt this approach to frustration. How you respond to your children's frustration will also affect how they learn to deal with their frustration. If you become impatient and angry with them, their frustration may escalate and more quickly turn into anger and despair, further preventing your children from resolving the source of their frustration. If you respond to your children's frustration by asking them in a soothing voice what they are frustrated about and discuss how you want to help them deal with it, then they will likely calm down and follow your lead in looking for a solution to their frustration.

Teaching Frustration Mastery

Despite the fundamental role that frustration plays in their efforts to be their best, children are rarely shown how to deal with their frustration in a constructive way. Your goal as parents is to teach your children to stop the negative emotional chain at frustration by responding positively to the frustration when it first arises.

The first mistake that many children make--and that parents often encourage--when faced with frustration is to just increase their effort, in other words, do whatever they are doing more and harder. But then they are violating the Law of Insanity: doing the same thing and expecting different results.

When frustration first arises, rather than plowing ahead, your children should do just the opposite, in other words, step back from the situation that is causing the frustration. For example, if your child can't solve a math problem or learn a new sports skill that she is practicing, she should set it aside and take a break. Stopping the activity creates emotional distance from the frustration, thus easing its grip on them.

Next, your children should do something that is fun and relaxing during the break, for example, getting a snack (hunger is a significant cause of frustration, particularly among young children), listening to music, or getting some physical activity. This step lessens the uncomfortable physical symptoms that come with frustration and generates emotions, such as happiness or excitement, that can counteract the feelings of frustration. A powerful way to counter the feelings of frustration when they have stepped back from the activity is to have your children do something at which they can succeed, thus feeding their feelings of confidence and generating positive emotions such as pride and inspiration.

Once the negative emotional chain has been broken, your children should return to the activity with a focus on finding a solution that will relieve the frustration. This process starts with understanding the problem. If they know what the specific problem is, then they have a better chance at finding a solution. Though you want to give your children plenty of opportunity to identify the problem and find the solution themselves, I encourage you to engage in "emotional coaching" when needed by providing guidance and direction to help them find the answers they need. Here's a helpful hint: sometimes it's useful to break down the bigger problem into smaller, more manageable problems.

The reality is that children can't always immediately clear the obstacles to their goals, so continued efforts in pursuit of those goals would be futile. The barriers may be just too great to surmount on that day. Your children have two options here.

First, they can change their goals to ones that can be achieved in the short term. For example, let's say your tennis-playing son is getting frustrated because he's losing a match and nothing he can do will turn the match around. In this case, continuing to pursue the goal of winning will likely take him quickly along the negative emotional chain. But if he shifts his goals, for instance, improving a technical or tactical part of his game, he can still experience some success and get something out of the match.

Second, there are going to be days when your children just aren't going to make any progress toward their goals and continuing to try without success will just discourage them and actually hurt their efforts in the long run. In this case, it may be wise to deliberately "give up" and choose to fight another day.