

## Can You Allow Your Child's Disappointment?

Holiday time is here again! Amidst the celebration are the inevitable frustrations and disappointments, especially with our children. The build-up of Christmas is so great, that disappointment and anti-climax are the inevitable fall-out. And our fears of either not being able to get our children what they want or wanting to throttle them because of ingratitude get in our way of supporting children through the disappointments.

Finding yourself in the commercial-frenzied world of shopping—if not in the stores, then on television, or in catalogues, the first frustration you probably face is the “gimmies.” What we really hope for is an altruistic child who cares only about others. But when demanding children provoke visions of greed, narcissism, and unappreciative brats dancing in our heads, anger is fueled, and we react in ways we regret.

The main thing to remember is that children are developmentally egocentric. So when your expectation is set appropriately, and you understand that *a child's job is to get what he wants when he wants it*, you will have an easier time. If you understand that your child is more interested in herself than in what Grandma wants, you can respond calmly. “You wish you could have lots of things for Christmas. (Acknowledge and validate her point of view) Just for now, try putting yourself into Grandma’s head and see if you can come up with something she might like.” (Redirecting her thoughts without criticizing her wishes). When expectations are realistic, reactions are calmer. But when you expect her to be appreciative of all that Grandma has done for her, you are more likely to lose it when she says, “I don’t want to get anything for her.”

You will spend far less time fighting with resistant, demanding children if you take a little extra time to pay attention to their agendas and let them know that their wishes are heard. If you take a minute to understand your child’s point of view, battles can diminish.

“Wow, Mom, look at this remote-control car. This is so awesome. I *have* to have it!” your son shouts across the store.

Instead of, "How many times have I told you, we are not shopping for you, try instead, "Oh, that is a beauty. I love the color, don't you? And the chrome all around really makes it shine."

"Yeah, and look at this remote. You can make it do all kinds of stuff. Can I have it?" he asks.

"You know, I just saw a sweater over there that I would give anything for. So I know just how you feel. It's disappointing when you want something really badly, and it's too much money or your mother says you can't have it. Wouldn't it be neat if we each had a magic wand, and we could make both the car and the sweater free! What else would you want if you had a magic wand?" you ask with genuine curiosity.

"Oh, man. I'd get this and this and this and, well maybe not that, but this," he says, eyes wide.

"I wonder what it would be like to be an elf in Santa's workshop. Do you think you could make anything you wanted?"

"Cool, that would be so awesome. I'd bring home so much stuff," he says.

"What would be the first thing you would make?"

"A bomber jet with an eight-foot wingspan." He's off in his imagination.

"What would you make for Daddy?" you ask as you take his hand and move on. "Let's think about what we want to put on our Christmas lists. My guess is that remote control car will go on yours."

Sound too good to be true? It works. Maybe not this smoothly every time, but it works because the child's desires are acknowledged and taken seriously even if not fulfilled. When our fears of raising a spoiled brat interfere, we react with anger or annoyance, which naturally is met with resistance from a child who can't easily let go and move on. Then you have an angry, frustrated child for the rest of the shopping trip, who will never be able to think about what Daddy would like.

We get stuck in fearing either a tantrum or giving in to what they want, so we avoid indulging desires at all costs. But disappointment is an important experience for a child to learn to cope with. If the tantrum happens, allow it. Don't avoid it by either ignoring it or trying to fix it. When your child expresses disappointment when he opens his present from Aunt Martha, begin by

acknowledging the disappointment before teaching the lesson of the thought that counts. Either, “Those are really nice socks and you should be grateful” or “Don’t worry, we can take them back and get something you really want” teaches the child that his feelings don’t count or that he should always be happy. Children are perfectly capable of understanding and accepting the fact that they can’t have everything they want—when their desires are accepted. “I know socks aren’t the most fun present. Aunt Martha probably doesn’t know what you like. We sent her a book, and we don’t know if she’ll like that either. Buying presents for people you don’t see too often is hard. It was nice that she sent you a present though, wasn’t it?” This pulls it all together—acknowledgment, acceptance, and the lesson you want him to learn.