

The Power of Adversity

“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”

Kubler-Ross

As parents we would never wish ill on our children. In fact, the mere idea of their suffering can make us break out in a cold sweat. We work hard day in and day out to provide a safe, stable environment, and we attempt to give them as many opportunities as we can possibly find. We want our children to live in a beautiful, cheerful world of smiles and splendor. Our love is unconditional and deep. We can watch them sleep and feel our hearts melt. God has given us a great blessing with our children, and we do our best to cherish that blessing with every fiber of our beings.

Sadly, or maybe not, we do not live in a “happily ever after” storybook. For every one of us there are trials and tribulations; unforeseen problems or consequences that may give us pause. Not one of us is exempt from this hard reality. We would not wish for a new cross or hardship to carry, but we would rather it be our suffering than our child’s burden. There are two important points to consider when obstacles arise: 1) adversity can lead to strength and 2) how our own endurance of hardship becomes a model for our children.

In Malcolm Gladwell’s book *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, he spends some time showing how people’s strengths can be their

weaknesses and vice versa. In one chapter, Gladwell analyzes dyslexia. He asserts that no one would wish for a learning disability for one's child. Yet, Gladwell goes on to say that "an extraordinarily high number of successful entrepreneurs are dyslexic. A recent study by Julie Logan at the City University London puts the number around a third. This list includes names such as: Richard Branson, Charles Schwab, cell phone pioneer Craig McCaw, and Paul Orfalea, the founder of Kinko's—to name just a few." In all of these cases of dyslexia, one fact remained undeniable, the supportive structure of a family who believes in that child, despite the diagnosis, can make a crucial difference. The president of Goldman Sachs, who happens to be dyslexic, says this about his ability to navigate a successful business career, "My upbringing allowed me to be comfortable with failure...because we (dyslexics) are so accustomed to the downside. It doesn't faze us. And so we look at most situations and see much more of the upside than the downside." The point is that despite obstacle, there is plenty of room for success. A bad day or a dismal disappointment does not mean a lifetime of defeat.

This sort of reversal of circumstances can be true in every person's life. It does not take more than a quick skimming of any "Lives of the Saints" book to see how these amazing people turned hardships into something beautiful and promising. Perhaps St. Therese would not have been as reflective without her illnesses, or St. Ignatius would not have formed the Jesuits if he had not been hurt in battle, or even St. Thomas Aquinas would not have been so wise without suffering his family-imposed imprisonment for wanting to join the Dominicans. Time after time, we can see people fighting through their circumstances to bring something beautiful to life.

Finally, it would be remiss to not acknowledge what must have been an indescribably agonizing moment for Mary to witness Christ on the cross. However, with that, He saved all of us. Truly, this is our most significant example of strength through adversity. “Because he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are tested.” (Hebrews 2:18)

Watching our children suffer disappointments, not getting invited to a classmate’s birthday party or not making an important team, is painful. However, disappointment is a necessary part of growing up. So, parents, here are some tips to helping your child cope with the inevitable:

***Know your role. Modeling appropriate behavior when things don’t go our way teaches our kids to handle disappointments. For example, you have taken your child on a wonderful vacation. At the end, you ask how he enjoyed the respite, only to hear “It was ok, but a lot of it was boring.” You may be crushed, but you can’t force your own expectations about spending quality time together on your child. The key is to not overreact with a hurtful response, but instead to ask a specific question such as “What was your favorite part of the vacation?” This type of redirection will encourage your child to see the good parts of the experience. It’s important to step back and let the child use these new skills allowing him to be responsible for his own feelings.

***Help your child find his strengths. One of the most common disappointments children face is feeling they aren’t as good as their peers. Perhaps they didn’t make the honor role or they didn’t get a role in the school drama. Failure can turn into a blessing. It can be a motivator to study harder, to practice harder, or to attempt a different approach. Success isn’t always about “winning,” it’s more often about finding another

path. Help your child find something he or she can be good at that matches his skill set or interests. If that is not an option, find another way to approach the goal that takes advantage of his abilities.

***In Elizabeth Crary's book, *Dealing with Disappointment: Helping Kids Cope When Things Don't Go Their Way*, she recommends several ways for parents to encourage children of all ages to relax after a disappointment:

1. Encourage exercise: Running, yoga, dancing or hiking helps to release excess energy of bottled emotion.
2. Listen as your child talks. Sometimes, he just needs to talk.
3. Read a book—this can bring calmness by focusing on something else.
4. Make something—bake brownies, sculpt with clay, paint a picture, do a puzzle.
5. Get a hug: physical touch is comforting.
6. Find humor in the situation. This helps to teach a child to look at things from a different angle.

So, if your child is experiencing a disappointment, be at peace. Use this time to help him grow stronger, happier, and more reflective. Your child just may have received the better draw. This poem by Douglas Malloch says it well:

*The tree that never had to fight
For sun and sky and air and light,
But stood out in the open plain
And always got its share of rain,
Never became a forest king
But lived and died a scrubby...
Good timber does not grow with ease,
The stronger wind, the stronger trees.*