

HOPE Newsletter - Issue 38

When Your Child Doesn't Get an Award



By Braden Bell

As the season of graduation and awards ceremonies approaches, I think it's useful to consider how to respond when your child doesn't receive an award.

When my youngest attended kindergarten, he enjoyed an unusually happy year. He loved school so much that he literally cried on weekends and breaks because he couldn't be in school. The year was idyllic — until the last day when awards in various subject areas were given out. My son did not receive an award, although his best friend did.

While lamenting his lack of an award, he launched into an emotional downward spiral, going from disappointment to saying his friend didn't deserve the award and the teachers were unfair. He then escalated to saying it had been a terrible year, school was awful, on and on.

Ironically, the next day I presented an award at the graduation ceremonies where I am a teacher. I settled on the winner after weeks of agonizing deliberation. Another student was bitterly disappointed, and both student and parents made sure I knew just how upset they were.

These two bookend experiences emphasized to me how important it is to cope productively with disappointment. It's an important skill for a happy life. Thus, it's critical for parents to model and teach.

Based on years of experience both giving awards and coaching my own children through the aftermath of not receiving them, I've learned a few things that are helpful in navigating this process. These can apply to both parent and student.

Question your motives. Unfortunately, many students and parents often validate activities by external markers. We collectively struggle to enjoy activities for their intrinsic value. Instead, we often have to be the best — and prove it. I have seen students who collect awards and accolades. They get no joy from the accomplishment, but derive great misery from the absence of recognition. Some of this is self-imposed. But in my experience, the student is often responding to subtle cues from parents. It's worth asking some pointed questions of yourself: Does the award really mean all that much? Or is it simply a desire to be the best and receive external recognition? How much of the disappointment is wounded pride? Is your child upset because they are hurt or because someone else won?

Don't model narcissism. It's absolutely human to respond to disappointment as my son did: questioning the fairness of the process, the judgment of the giver and whether the winner deserved to win. It's human, but it's flawed, both logically and morally, and it leads very quickly to a dark place. There's some narcissism inherent in assuming one's child deserved an award she did not get. At best, it's shortsighted to presume that our understanding is complete; there may be numerous factors we don't know. The strength of our feelings does not make them true. Humility and wisdom suggest granting the possibility that we don't see the whole picture. Sometimes in these situations one hears accusations of bias; ironically, those who suggest this don't seem to realize that a parent is just as likely to be biased as a teacher, coach, or administrator. My experience is that those who give awards are keenly aware of their responsibility and are thoughtful and conscientious. There is very little incentive to be biased. While reasonable people might disagree with any specific outcome, I believe most decisions are made in good faith.

Take the long view. Short of a Nobel or Pulitzer, most awards don't really have a long-term effect on anyone's life. After they are given, they have a short shelf life and quickly decline in importance. How many adults can truly point to a childhood award making a deep impact on their future?

Accept that feelings provide us with choices. After my son vented, I explained that feelings are like living things, whichever one he fed would get bigger. He realized that he had a choice: He could focus on his own unhappiness or be happy for his friend. Fortunately, he chose to be happy for his friend. With that decision, the bad feelings faded quickly.

Learn to find joy in the success of other people. Disappointment provides an opportunity to take joy in someone else's success. That's difficult; it takes practice, but the ability to enjoy another's good fortune is part of an emotionally mature life. It's a foundation to a successful relationship and is the source of far more joy than we get from exclusively celebrating our own triumphs.

Focus on relationships and happy memories. My son ultimately overcame his disappointment by choosing to be happy for his friend. That was the right choice because the friendship has endured well past the memory of the award. He made the most effective emotional investment. On the other hand, the memory of my student's anger still stings many years later. Before that award, my relationship with the student and family had been close and mutually rewarding. Ending on a sour note hurt badly. The greater tragedy, though, is that the moment before the award the student had years and years of happy memories. Growth, experience and accomplishments were all negated in one moment of disappointment.

If a child cares enough about an activity to be disappointed by not winning an award, that activity has probably been important to her development. She has probably grown and gained any number of important intrinsic benefits, including relationships. It is truly tragic to lose those good memories because of one award.

Conversely, focusing on the happy memories, the lessons learned, the personal growth and skills developed, and the relationships cultivated may help lessen his very real sting of feeling passed over.

So when your child doesn't get an award, stop a minute. Acknowledge the real disappointment, but then pause and redirect her, him, and, if needed, yourself. Don't allow one disappointing experience to wipe out happy memories or damage relationships. In doing this, you help your child stay focused on what is most valuable and you help them (and yourself) develop resilience and emotional maturity.

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