



# Parents, Don't Let Your Disappointment Defeat You

by Rita Eichenstein, PhD

***It's a taboo feeling you don't dare discuss: when you're feeling disappointed by your child.***

If you are like most parents of atypical kids, you may believe you're supposed to take your child's atypical development in stride and be grateful for your uniquely wonderful son or daughter—regardless of the behavioral, learning, or medical challenges you have to deal with every day.

***You may think you're not allowed to feel angry, resentful, or sad.***

You may try to suppress your disappointment and condemn yourself because you believe it means you're selfish and unkind. And you may never, ever talk about your “shameful” feelings with your friends or even your partner.

***But denying your feelings can be bad for your mental health and could be dangerous for your child.***

A recent study found that children with disabilities are at almost double the average risk for child abuse. How is this horrible statistic possible? One reason could be that parents who do not face their own feelings about their special-needs kids are more likely to take out their resentment and disappointment on the children themselves. This doesn't always mean physical abuse. There are other more subtle ways your buried disappointment may be harming your child.

## **How disappointed parents take it out on their kids**

In my practice as a neuropsychologist, I've witnessed lots of parents with myriads of unpleasant feelings that they aren't ready to deal with yet. Parents may love their children and work hard to get them the best care, but often, their unacknowledged feelings get in the way. Here are a few common parental emotional responses to three types of special-needs kids.

**The child with ADHD vs the “fix-it” parent.** This is the parent who is accustomed to solving difficult problems at work. He comes home every evening increasingly fed up with his child, who is experiencing repeated failures in controlling behaviors and whose self-esteem is falling. Dad decides to fix it by lecturing or blaming the child’s mom for lack of discipline in the home. He feels angry and unnerved by the apparent failure of his child—he is not used to failure and doesn’t like it. He ends up in my office wondering if his child is lazy and manipulative.

**High-functioning autistic child vs the socially conscious parent.** The set-up for disappointment is the child’s lack of social skills. While many high-functioning autistic children are smart in school, they inevitably push other kids too hard, blurt out embarrassing statements in the most inappropriate places (“Mom, my butt itches!” “Look at that fat ugly person!”), or pick their nose during school choir performance. The parent feels humiliated and angry. Parents may be unintentionally gruff with their child, lecture them, or lash out.

**Weak academic skills vs the high-achieving parent.** In a family of high achievers, the arrival of a child who is weaker academically almost always causes some disappointment, frustration, and even embarrassment. A parent may think, *How does he not understand how to spell that word? Why does she hate to read... or not understanding what we’re talking about at the dinner table?* Parents can descend into sarcasm, anger, or physical punishment, especially when they think their child is doing these behaviors to “test” or “tease” their parent.

You might think these parents must be heartless, but they are not. They are typical parents engaged in raising what they had hoped would be typical children. And the feelings emerge. What to do?

### **Five ways to tackle your disappointment, starting now**

You can’t pretend your way out of disappointment—your child knows you too well. Even a seriously impaired child will inevitably ask the heartbreaking question, “Mommy, why are you so mad at me?” But there are actions you can take today to come to terms with your feelings and learn how to manage them.

#### **1. Be honest with yourself—and then talk about it.**

Examine yourself, and be totally honest. *Do I harbor anger, resentment, disappointment, or embarrassment about my child?* Many parents do—dig deeper if you can’t find it. Remember the cancelled ski trip? The tantrum at the neigh-

bor’s birthday party? Find a confidante and talk about your feelings. (Make sure it is someone you really trust, because this could become fodder for gossip.) Better yet, schedule a few sessions with a therapist. The therapist can guide you toward self-discovery and suggest healthy outlets for your feelings, along with ways to rejuvenate. There are many low-fee or no-fee therapy centers so it needn’t place another financial burden on you. But it can help a lot.

#### **2. Find out more about your child’s strengths and get more information about his or her disorder.**

Many parents are better able to calm their emotional responses after they read a full diagnostic assessment that includes describing their child’s strengths as well as limitations. Learning more about your child’s profile may help you adjust your expectations, recognize signs of progress, and manage your emotions. If you are not satisfied with your current evaluation, seek a second opinion. Hopefully, you will be helped by a professional that can offer you more than just a diagnosis and can provide true insight.

#### **3. Every night, think of one thing that makes you proud of your child.**

Think about it before going to bed. Remember, you will need to think about that one thing the next day (maybe a lot). I’m sure your child has many things to be proud of. Start thinking about one thing at a time, and the list will grow. All children have unique gifts and ways to make you chuckle. Don’t focus so hard on what’s wrong with your child. Your child needs you to be their cheerleader and positivity coach; begin by focusing on the positive!

#### **4. Find a support group in your area.**

Whether your child’s condition is rare or commonplace, there are support groups for almost everything. Many parents find that learning to commiserate, laugh, cry, and share stories is the most healing therapy.

#### **5. Know when to get help.**

If you feel that your emotions or your spouse/partner/shared caretaker’s emotions get out of control, or you worry when reading this that you have crossed the red line into abusive behavior with your child, GET HELP NOW. Do not continue to avoid the need to take care of your feelings in order to help your child. Talk with a therapist or start with [www.childhelp.org](http://www.childhelp.org) for more information. 📞

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