

Young love

Helping your kids cope with heartbreak

BY CHRISTINE JUNGE

As anyone who's lived through it can tell you, childhood is filled with heartbreaks. Friends move. Crushes don't return your feelings. The "popular" kids don't accept you. But harder than dealing with any of these things yourself is watching your child go through them.

"We want the best for our kids. We feel their pain more intensely than they do,"

explained Dr. Larry Kutner, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of several books on parenting. This emotional reaction to seeing their child get hurt can steer parents in the wrong direction — toward trying to solve the problem, Kutner said. "Your job as a parent isn't to fix the problem, your job is to make your child feel better, and ultimately to try to get them to learn something," he said.

To accomplish that, parents

need to respond to a child's hurt feelings while keeping two things in mind: his or her maturity level and what a person of any age would want to hear in a similar situation. "What you should do is acknowledge the intensity of the child's emotions. Say something like, 'I can see you're really upset by this.' If you can, ask something more like, 'What can you tell me?'" Kutner said.

He also advised avoiding telling a child what to do. "If



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you walk in with a solution, they'll shut you off. Just as an adult would," he said.

Mary White, a guidance counselor at the Hosmer School in Watertown said that parents should shy away from solving their child's problem for another reason.

"If kids come up with a solution themselves, they're more likely to do it," she said. To help the child devise a way to resolve the situation, White suggested asking him or her lots of questions.

"First of all, say, 'Tell me what happened.' Then ask, 'How did that make you feel? What would help the situation? What can you do to solve

the problem?'" she said.

On top of giving their children too much advice, parents also fall into the trap of dismissing their feelings. No matter how small the problem may seem to an adult, "it matters to the child," White said. "Usually things do blow over, but... the feelings are real."

Another counselor at the Hosmer School, Jessica Maloney, said that parents should broach the subject of emotional letdowns before they ever happen. "Definitely talk about this throughout their lives. The more knowledge a child has, the better they are prepared to react to things," she said. One opening for this kind of discussion is when a child's friend is going through a difficult time, Maloney said. She suggested asking your child to describe what happened to the other person, how he or she reacted, and what your child would've done in the situation.

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3 TIPS FOR PARENTS DEALING WITH A CHILD'S HEARTBREAK

- Know that you don't have to fix everything. Just being there helps.
- Establish communication before a crisis so when something happens, your kids feel comfortable coming to you.
- Listen to your child so you truly understand the problem. Don't jump to conclusions.

—Dr. Marc Dalton

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CHILDHOOD

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Maloney also recommended that parents teach kids about empathy early on. "For example, when your kids start to give out valentines you can ask them, 'How do you feel when you don't get a valentine from someone? Sad, so let's give everyone a valentine,'" she said.

Dr. Marc Dalton, a child and adolescent psychiatry resident at Massachusetts General Hospital, suggested bringing up this topic whenever your child is going through a major change. "When the child is entering a new class, starting a new sport's team, or starting a new activity, talk with them in beginning.... See what their anxieties and concerns are," he said.

Dalton also emphasized the

importance of really listening to your child so you can fully understand what's going on. "You might have an idea of why the child is upset, but the problem might turn out to be something else," he said. He gave the example of a girl coming home hurt because a boy wouldn't be her friend. From hearing that, a parent might assume the child is upset about getting rebuffed. But maybe it has less to do with that one boy's rejection and more to do with the fact that he has a lot of friends and now your child can't hang out with the popular crowd. Without getting to the bottom of the problem, it's harder for you to help your child find a solution, Dalton said.

If a parent can sense that something is wrong, but the child won't talk about it,

Dalton suggested hanging out with the child more — as long as you follow one rule: "Don't push. Out of our own anxiety to know what's going on and fix it, we're sometimes not able to be as available as we think. Maybe just spend more time with them not discussing the problem. This may eventually get them to open up, or it will make them feel secure enough to handle the situation on their own," he said.

And after all, teaching children how to handle all the problems that life throws at them is really what parenting is all about. "There's this great parental desire to fix everything for our children," Dalton said. "But sometimes, helping them get through failure helps create later success. As much as we want our kids to succeed, we have to teach them how to fail, too."