

Viewing Unwanted Events

Ask parents about “unwanted events” and wait for their list. Depending on their children’s ages, the list might include behavioral challenges pertaining to homework, chores, cooperation and manners. Or it might instead focus on events that impacted their children, such as friends moving away, sports injuries, a friend no longer wanting to be friends. Think of the first category as mistakes, the second category as disappointments.

How parents handle unwanted events hinges on how they are viewing those events. Two parents can view the same kind of mistake or disappointment differently. In fact, a parent can view the same mistake or disappointment differently on different days of the week. One day the mistake might be viewed as purposeful, obnoxious and insufferable. On another day the mistake might be viewed as “just a mistake,” unappreciated, worthy of a consequence, but not the end of the world. When we are calm and thinking clearly, we can usually see that our children’s mistakes provide great opportunities to teach about something important and needed, perhaps, respect, cooperation or the importance of effort and hard work.

But when an “unwanted event” hurts our children or somehow shakes up their world, even the most insightful parent struggles. Perhaps they come home crying because a friend’s parents are divorcing. Or a close friend was badly injured in a car accident or in a game or a practice. How can we find what to teach from unwanted events when we ourselves are upset and stressed?

While there is nothing easy about this, here are a few thoughts that might be helpful. First, zoom out a few clicks (think Google maps) so you can see the big picture. Remind yourself that whatever your children are dealing with is probably similar to future unwanted events that they will be exposed to their whole lives. Ask yourself: “How may I use this? “What can I teach?”

Second, never let pain go to waste! They are already hurting. Your job is not to put your “fix-it” hat on and magically make them feel better. It makes perfect sense that they are hurting: The unwanted event demands it. Instead, your job is to think about what they might be able to learn from this that they might not be able to learn at other, less painful, times.

If your children tend to over-think and get themselves emotionally overwrought, you might be able to teach them how you find peace and closure during difficult times. If they are searching for meaning in the unwanted event, you have a great opening to share with them how you have also struggled with this in your lifetime. Children especially need to feel closely connected to their parents at times when the world seems a cruel, random and unjust place. And they need both to be taken seriously as they wrestle with hard-to-answer questions and to be taught the wisdom of diversion.

There is a business term (point of diminishing returns) that refers to a point at which additional money invested in a business will not translate into increased profits. There is also a point in talking about unwanted events when parents can shift away from listening and agonizing with their children and move toward teaching that life exactly as it is is good enough. Life has never been perfect and never will be. We (and our friends and our loved ones) are not magically protected from unwanted events. When the unwanted events that cause pain and suffering appear in our lives, it is at least an opportunity for us to teach our children the skills they will need to deal with similar unwanted events throughout their lives. While no one wants their children to have their world shook up, the least we can do for them is to use the disappointing and unwanted events to teach gratitude and compassion.

By viewing unwanted events for the teaching opportunity they provide, we may be able to use the painful moments of our children’s lives to strengthen them in important ways for the rest of their lives.

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