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How Can I Handle it When My Child Complains About Having a Hard Time?©

I recently was asked a question by a parent that I think is a really common situation. I hope this new way of looking at this situation helps!

Question: My son, age 6 comes home from school every day in a very negative mood. No matter what I ask him, he says things are awful. I've even tried to explain how much harder kids in other countries have it. Any suggestions?

What a good question! It's obvious you have put a lot of thought into trying to help your son. My guess is that there is more going on inside of him than meets the eye. There are a couple of possibilities of what is troubling him. When kids have emotions they just can't shake, it usually means they are struggling with deep emotions they haven't been able to sort out, either because of their young age, or because these emotions have been stored up for a while. It's possible that your son:

- Has emotions stored up on the inside regarding other difficulties such as: a recent move; loss of a family member, pet, or friend; trouble at school with a friend, teacher, bully or schoolwork, etc.
- Has just reached a new level of intellectual development so that he is now aware that the world is a "mixed bag". At six he is now able to take in information about the hardships of our world, in a way that he couldn't before. Now he's getting an understanding that: people can get sick and even die; tragedies like 9/11 and school shootings occur; and Moms and Dads sometime divorce.

This new level of understanding makes his world feel like a much less safe place, and causes emotions to rise up inside of him that he may not be able to handle on his own.

It's possible that when he comes home and says how awful school is, it is really his way of saying what a tough time he is having overall. While it makes logical sense to try to explain how much better his life is than most of the children in the world, a child who is hurting will not be able to take that in as a comforting thought. Instead, it will cause him to feel worse because he will feel alone in his pain and feel you don't get how tough things are for him right now.

My suggestion would be to respond to his comments about how awful things are with empathy and understanding. Helpful comments include:

- Yes, that must have been hard
- I'm so sorry you had a tough day
- I wish you weren't going through such a tough time right now
- I wouldn't have wanted that to happen to me either
- I wish that would have gone better for you

Giving him the gift of empathy will cause him to feel safer with you and open up more. It will also give him a way to talk about the hurt he has inside. Even if you're not sure what is really bothering him, keep responding empathetically. Not only will this help him in the moment, it will serve as a great foundation for a strong, healthy relationship with you in the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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