

Chapter 3

Hair Raising Children

Put Those Chips Back, Now!

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Autumn at her drawing desk.

My 16-year-old daughter Autumn sat crumpled on the floor and my heart broke. She had applied to two summer art programs and just received a letter informing her that she was not accepted to the one she thought she could get into. The statewide program accepted 1,000 applicants. The other (all expenses paid), located in Colorado, accepted only 50.

Parents begin to help children learn about disappointment when their offspring take their first wobbly steps into the world. A great training ground is the checkout line at the grocery store. As harried parents load milk and bread on the conveyor belt, their children beg for bags of chips and candy bars that are conveniently located at kids' eye level.

When I see a mom say "no" in a tone that doesn't welcome debate, I see a parent who is teaching her children that they can't always get what they want. I also see parents toss a bag of chips in the cart just to get their howling toddler to shut up. Both parent and child will pay a high price for that moment of peace.

When children are small, it's the parent who pretty much controls their disappointment. If parents take care to ensure that their children will accept (without a temper tantrum) that they won't get a computer game or won't be able to stay up to see a television show, they will be able to help them when bigger challenges arise.

By the time my adolescent daughter sustained the blow of the rejection letter, she had put back many bags of chips and tearfully returned countless candy bars to the display case. On that sad day, I pulled Autumn up from the floor and took her to her favorite restaurant for dinner.

As I watched her eat, I remembered a moment when she was three years old and returned home from nursery school in a huff. "Mommy, why didn't you tell me it was going to rain?" she demanded. At that young age, she believed I was omnipotent and controlled the world. I gently

explained to her that, although I did my best to look out for her, I couldn't control the weather. During dinner, her dad and I talked about the disappointments we suffered. I told her my sister didn't ask me to be her bridesmaid, even though I asked her to be mine. I wasn't able to go to college right away but had to work for a year to save up to pay my tuition.

Her dad still feels bad that he never won the spelling bee, and he didn't make the baseball team. The girl he asked to go to the prom went with his best friend instead. Her little brother piped up, "I was disappointed when I was born and found out you were my sister."

"That goes double for me," she snarled back at him. Her attack on the brotherly dig seemed to cheer her up.

A couple of weeks later another letter arrived. "I'm in!" Autumn screamed. "I'm going to Colorado!" I hollered with my own delight, grateful that the admissions committee recognized her potential.

Many parents and their children will wait for letters this spring. Parents stand by and hope that their children will achieve their dreams. Happy celebrations and hearty congratulations are desired, of course, but disappointment must be carefully navigated - with parents at the helm. Stay close and share your wisdom and your pain - and assurance that victory (just not this time) is at hand.