

A few weeks ago, I wrote a column on optimism and resilience, saying that these were qualities “only parents can teach”. I was reminded of that idea in a recent therapy session. A fifteen year old was telling me about her grandfather’s funeral last week. He was 92, died peacefully and surrounded by his family – all good. His wife, however, died in 1971 at the age of 50, leaving seven children, four under the age of twelve. The grandmother’s death preceded the fifteen year old’s birth by twenty years.

She told me the funeral addressed both deaths: the “easy” one and the “hard” one. She talked about how much she learned at the funeral about her grandfather and how the loss of his wife at such an early age changed him and the lives of all their children (her mother, aunts and uncles).

But it was what she said next that made me think about optimism and resilience: “When you don’t like the ending it’s not really over yet”. She was talking about what it must have been like in 1971 when her grandmother died and how it must have seemed like the end of the world for the children and her grandfather.

Since life doesn’t ask us for permission on how it should unfold, our only choice is in how we choose to view it. I was struck by this fifteen year old’s perspective and I think there are numerous, almost daily implications for us and our children. How do we react if they have late assignments or a disorganized planner or locker, and a lower grade? What if they don’t get as much “playing” time as we think they should? Or if the college planning process doesn’t go as smoothly as we had anticipated?

If we don’t like the ending, maybe it’s not really over. Maybe our children have to have late assignments so they can learn to develop their own system for being organized. Maybe the other kids on the team contribute more to the team and this disappointment offers an opportunity to learn that their worth is based on more important criteria than their athletic ability. Maybe their journey involves a college other than the one we thought it would include.

I think we get so caught up in day to day events that we sometimes have trouble stepping back and viewing a disappointment or a loss for what it can teach our children. In our desire to prevent their pain we may miss the greater teaching opportunity.