

7 Strategies for Your Child's Bad Mood

Everyone has a bad mood now and again – and that includes our kids. But if your child is grumpy or blue on a regular basis, it's no fun for the family or for your child. And it could be a sign that your child needs help.

I talked with clinical psychologist David Miklowitz, director of the UCLA Child & Adolescent Mood Clinic and author of “The Bipolar Teen” and “The Bipolar Survival Guide,” for some suggestions about how to approach a moody child.

1. Ask, don't label. “What are you feeling right now?” is better than, “You are so grumpy!”

2. Choose your time and tone.

If you have noticed your child's mood dipping at a particular time of day, wait for a time when your child seems calm and in a pleasant mood, and then ask in a non-threatening way, “You seem to have a harder time right after school. Anything I can help you with?” Try to keep your tone relaxed. Avoid overstating the case (“I'm really at the end of my rope” or “It's ruining our family”).

3. Open the door to conversation. As kids get older, they become more secretive about how they are feeling. “A lot of kids, when they're feeling bad, just withdraw from their parents,” Miklowitz says. Wait for that calm and pleasant time, point out that you have noticed your child keeping to herself and let her know that you are there if she would like to talk about anything that's bothering her. Be available for one-on-one time. “You open the door to having a conversation, but you don't force them,” says Miklowitz. “Kids need time with their parents even if they don't seem to want it.”

4. Watch for clues. If your child isn't talking, look for other evidence about what he is feeling. What behavior do you notice? Is your child writing poetry, creating artwork or listening to music that is particularly dark or angry? Knowing what's going on in your child's emotional life is important, but avoid “stalking” behavior such as checking your child's phone or lurking on social media, as that will only alienate your child. “I think it's important to take a

caring stance, but you also have to be aware of boundaries, particularly in teens,” Miklowitz says.

5. Look for signs that it's serious.

Your child needs help if you notice a combination of any of the following:

- Sudden change in mood (depression, anxiety and irritability are most common)
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Loss of interest in school or favorite activities
- Sleep disturbances (sleeping too little or too much)
- Loss of appetite
- Suicidal or morbid talk, or

expressing feelings of guilt

- Being unable to concentrate or make decisions
- Preoccupation with death or morbid topics

6. Offer an alternative. If you notice more than one of these symptoms, it's time to get your child to talk to *someone*. It can be hard for a parent to admit that they are not the best person for their child to talk to, but Miklowitz says that in some cases it's best to choose someone else. If a child's parents are divorced, for instance, the child may not feel comfortable discussing her feelings about that with either parent. Ask your child whether they think you are the best person to help them, or who they think would be another good person. “Make them feel like they have some ownership over the decision,” says Miklowitz.

7. Bring in a professional. In many cases you will still want to consult a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker. Think about this as non-negotiable, the same way doctor checkups and trips to the dentist are. Avoid presenting it to the child in a dramatic way. A matter-of-fact, empathetic approach will make your child feel most comfortable. “The kid is looking to you to see what kind of reaction you are having emotionally,” says Miklowitz. “Communicate that you are on top of the situation.”

Learn more, and send Dr. Miklowitz your questions, at www.semel.ucla.edu/champ.

