

When Your Child Gets Moody

“The trick is what one emphasizes. We either make ourselves miserable—or we make ourselves happy. The amount of work is the same.”—Carlos Castaneda, author

Moods. All kids and teenagers go through moods when they're negative, overly serious—and surly. Although child development experts say moodiness is common for all kids, some kids tend to be more moody than others, and some even suffer from clinical depression. How do you know what's normal and what's not? Consider these tips.

Try it...

For all parents

- All kids go through periods of moodiness, negativity, or “disequilibrium”—where they attempt to make sense of their rapid growth spurts. Researchers at the Gesell Institute of Human Development say these are normal, and they tend to happen during the half years until age 6 1/2 (starting at 6 months) and then tend to occur during the odd-numbered ages (ages 7, 9, 11, 13, and 15, for example). Read *Child Behavior* by Frances L. Ilg, M.D., for more information, <http://www.gesellinstitute.org/>.
- Always value your child's perspective, even when it seems overly negative. If you don't know what to say sometimes, consider saying, “It seems like you're having a bad day. Is that true?”
- Realize that sometimes “down” moods are fine for kids to have, and it's okay (as long as it's not a serious situation) not to lighten them up. If you try to get your child to lighten up at the wrong time, your child may think you're not valuing his true feelings.
- If your child ever says she wants to kill herself, take her seriously. Get professional help immediately.
- One of the best ways to get yourself—or your child—to lighten up is to put experiences into a broader context. Sometimes comparisons don't work, but sometimes they do. For example, if your child gets upset when a stranger yells at him for no apparent reason, point out that it's upsetting to get yelled at, but maybe the person doing the yelling had just lost a job or found out he or she has a terminal illness.
- Model how to handle life's challenges with humor and even-temperedness. It's important to model how to lighten up and still be responsible. For example, if you're driving and someone cuts you off, you may talk about how you don't like being cut off, but don't try to get back at the driver.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Be sensitive to the rapid growth your child is experiencing during this age. Young children often get frustrated and upset when they see what they want to do but don't have the physical or cognitive abilities to accomplish their wishes.
- Keep young children in predictable, comforting routines. Young children are more likely to thrive (and become less negative) when they know what to expect every day. Hungry, tired children are more likely to have bad moods than kids who aren't hungry or tired.
- Point out the progress you see your child making. If your child gets frustrated while stacking five blocks, talk about how she has mastered stacking four blocks.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Be sensitive to the energy it requires to attend school. Even children who attended an all-day child-care center or preschool may become exhausted when they start going to school and are required to learn in ways that are different from the preschool years. Make sure kids get extra time to unwind, rest, and recharge.
- Encourage your child to articulate what he is feeling and why. Start with simple feelings, such as feeling mad, sad, or glad, and then gradually expand the feelings to frustration, being scared, and being worried. Talking about feelings helps kids work through their emotions with words instead of by hitting, getting depressed, or getting stomachaches or headaches.
- Kids often can get in bad moods when they're doing too many things that they don't like to do. Follow your child's interests. If your child enjoys reading, visit the library often and check out lots of books. If your child loves to play soccer, go outside and play with your child. Continue to emphasize responsibility (such as doing homework and chores), but make sure there is a balance with responsibility and your child's interests.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Don't be surprised if your child's mood seems to change easily—or by the day. Early adolescence is the time of rapid change and rapid mood swings. Be patient. Read more about moods in [*Parenting at the Speed of Teens*](#).
- Give your child space if your child wants it. Sometimes kids at this age need more time to unwind and make sense of what's happening to them. Some kids, for example, don't understand why some kids at this age become so mean.
- When children are in a good mood, enjoy it. Laugh with them. Tease them (in ways that you both enjoy). Tell kids how much you enjoy being with them.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Monitor your teenager's schedule. High school counselors say that teenagers tend to overextend themselves and get overwhelmed or cut out too many activities and get bored. Help your teenager try to find a balance in his lifestyle, which often can help create a balance in his moods.
- Watch your teenager's moods. All teenagers have a bad day now and then, but most aren't as moody as they were during early adolescence. If you're concerned

about your teen's moods, check in with a high school counselor or teacher.

- Ask your teenager about her passions and interests. Make sure your teenager has time to do things she really wants to do—in addition to taking responsibility at school and at home.
- Discuss current events with your teenager. Expanding your teenager's worldview often helps him engage more in the world—and in his own life.