

# Is Your Kid Feeling Down In The Dumps?

Maureen Healy, MA, MBA

You know how to speak with your kid – you talk all the time about school homework, soccer games, and their favorite spaghetti dinner. But how come when your son or daughter comes home from school looking sad, you become speechless? Your eyes open up big and you take a few deep breaths wondering: What in the world do I do now?

Such questions beat on the heart and mind of every interested parent. But be easy on yourself, your parents likely didn't speak to you about your emotions, what to do when you were sad and how to let-go of such negative feelings. In other words, you are parenting in a completely new way focused primarily on raising happier kids now. (Older generations were more focused upon raising kids that behaved, got good grades and eventually got a "good job.")

Here are 5 suggestions to help you get your kids talking about what's going on in their life – especially when they are blue.

**1. Ask Directly:** Create a space between you and your child that is honest, respectful and sincere as you both learn your roles. With such a space, you can directly ask your child: Is something wrong? Because he or she doesn't need to always please you, be perfect and put on an "act" as the smart, skilled or likeable kid. The bottom-line is that your child feels safe, unconditionally loved and supported from you so they can safely share good things and their challenges.

**2. Give them Space:** Your son or daughter may or may not want to "talk about it" due to their personality, temperament and situation. As a highly effective parent, you need to give your child the space to process his or her emotions by themselves. Every child is learning what emotions are (identification), what to do with them (regulation) and how to do it (approach) so during this process of feeling deep emotions – many boys and girls need to sit with an emotion like sadness, and then with your assistance (when they are ready) learn to let it go (talk about it). But giving a child the space and allowing them the time they need to feel strong enough or comfortable enough to talk about it is very respectful.

**3. Show Empathy:** Sometimes it is easier to talk about something if you share a situation from your life where you felt sad. Empathize with your son or daughter, and then tell them truthfully how talking about it helped.

For example, I remember feeling stinky when my braces were put on in second grade. They hurt and looked all shiny while no one else in my class had braces. I was the first one! Ugh. But as I talked to my Mom, she helped me see how 1 year would fly by and how great my teeth would look. I then drew a picture of myself without braces, with straight teeth and hung it up on my wall.

So talking about and focusing on the positive side really helped me. Then after you share your story, I suggest asking your son or daughter: Do you want to talk about it? Often, they'll say yes at this point but if they say no – just take it as a sign they need more "alone time" before they are ready.

**4. Use Media:** I remember watching the television series, Wonder Woman, in the seventies and it was real to me. Kids today have the same experience. Harry Potter, iCarly, SpongeBob and more are real to them – in the same way the screen you are reading this on is real to you. This is especially true for kids under the age of 8 who often cannot tell the difference between TV-land and Real-Life land.

My point is this: You can use a situation from a TV or movie where the character was sad and they talked about it. Recall it with your child. For example, you can say “Remember when SpongeBob was sad and didn’t leave the Krusty Krab for days?” and then you can continue, “Do you feel this way?” (Of course, this method requires you spend some quality time in front of the television or big screen together.)

**5. Be Creative Together:** As a former Art Therapist, I found this the best way, bar none, to get kids talking about tough subjects. They begin to feel at ease by losing themselves into something they love like painting a birdhouse, playing with clay, completing a puzzle or strumming the guitar.

Because when a child feels comfortable, and more at-ease then they can open up about what’s on their mind. In other words, by entering into your child’s world and authentically connecting with them – they’ll feel safe and distracted enough to spill the proverbial beans. And even more importantly, they’ll be coming to you for advice on a situation like how to deal with a bully, mean girl or teacher that they feel is picking on them....

So giving your child space, allowing them to feel their feelings, and encouraging them to connect with you (when they are ready) is positive parenting. You are raising an emotionally intelligent child that is aware of how they feel, learning how to talk about their feelings (from sad to glad) and move into a more positive outlook each day.

Just to be clear, the type of sadness that I am referring to above is the “regular” emotional down-in-the-dumps feeling you get as a child when: Someone picks on you, You lose your favorite T-shirt, You fail a test, Forget your HW, BFF moves away, and pet Hammy the Hamster dies.

On the opposite side of the spectrum is a deep and pervasive sadness that is clinical and is understood through a child’s “irregular” behavior like: Talking about suicide, cutting, excessive crying and isolating of one’s self. This later type of sadness is clinical depression and is best served by getting professional assistance.

Last but not least, it is through the “clarity of your example” do your kids learn how to talk about their feelings especially the sad ones. So reflect for a moment: What do I do when I am sad? Do I talk about it? Because like Carl Jung stated, “If there is anything we wish to change in the child, we should first examine it and see whether it is not something we could better change in ourselves.”

So I vow to talk more about my “stinky feelings” when they are happening, share with my kids how I let-go of them and be that model of positive emotional health I came here to be. Because I know that my kids are watching, too – and this will help them become happier day-by-day. And isn’t that the goal? I sure believe so.