

Low mood: a guide for parents

Clinical Psychologist Dr Asha Patel on the signs and possible causes of low mood in children and young people, and how parents can help.

What is low mood?

Low mood is the experience of 'feeling down', and it's something that many children experience for short periods of time. It can include sadness, worry, low self-esteem or tiredness - or your child might feel anxious and panicky, frustrated or angry.

Low mood can usually be improved by making some small changes - getting more sleep, talking about their problems, or resolving a difficult situation that's worrying them. If your child's low mood lasts more than two weeks, it's time to check in with your GP - negative feelings lasting more than this can be a [sign of depression](#).

What are the symptoms of low mood?

You may notice that your child is more irritable with you, other family members or their friends. They might lack the energy or motivation to do the things they usually enjoy, or struggle to laugh at things that would usually amuse them. They might complain of feeling tired, and spend more time sleeping than usual.

What are the causes of low mood?

Low mood can be a response to a number of things - tensions at home, problems at school, relationships and more. Sometimes it's a reaction to a really difficult event, like a bereavement or other big change. But sometimes, there's no obvious cause, and that can be really worrying for parents who are uncertain what to do to help.

Low mood and tiredness

In fact, one of the most common reasons for a child's low mood is a simple one - they may just not be getting as much sleep as they need.

Children's sleep needs vary depending on their ages, ranging from around 11 hours per night for a 5-year-old to at least 9 hours per night for a teenager. If your child stays up late chatting to friends, doing homework, going on social media or playing games, then it's possible that their low mood is being caused or exacerbated by plain old tiredness.

It's very common for teens to seriously underestimate the amount of sleep they need; try and have a conversation about [the amount of sleep the NHS recommends](#) for their age, and encourage them to explore a way to relax before lights out.

Low mood and eating

A low mood can also be connected to low sugar levels. Try and make sure they eat something in the morning before starting lessons at school - a good breakfast can really help to lift their spirits. Avoiding processed and junk food if possible - whole grains and plenty of fruit and veg will help them avoid sugar spikes which can affect mood.

Low mood and hormones

Many girls will feel low around the time of their period, when hormones can make them feel edgy and tired. Encourage them to spot whether they often feel down at a certain point in their menstrual cycle - being able to predict when they might feel low can be helpful.

Does technology or screen time affect low mood?

Parents often ask whether there's a link between screen time and low mood. As yet, there's no definitive evidence - but look out for signs that technology is...

...Affecting their sleep

Some young people report that they're only able to fall asleep when their phone stops pinging with new alerts and updates; others find themselves constantly checking their phone for messages during the night.

If your children share a bedroom, they may be disturbed even when they are not using technology themselves. There's some evidence that the blue light from screens mimics daylight and stimulates the brain, and that it suppresses melatonin which regulates sleep-wake cycles.

...Leading to unhealthy comparisons

Many young people enjoy social media and texting - it's a fun break from school work and other routine activities.

Sometimes, though, social media can become a source of dissatisfaction. Young people can feel as though all their friends are more attractive, more successful, and having more fun than they are; this can have a negative effect on self-esteem, and increase a feeling of low mood.

...Overstimulating them

Multimedia content is exciting and designed to be really stimulating. It's possible that your child may feel bereft when they're not using a device - real life may seem dull, slow and colourless compared to the online world where something is happening all the time.

What can parents do to help?

It can be an upsetting and helpless feeling to see your child in a low mood, and it's natural to want to do whatever you can to ensure your child feels happier.

Help them understand why they're feeling low

Children will often bottle up their feelings; but it's helpful if they can recognise and name how they're feeling so that you can help them plan how to deal with the effects.

Encourage your child to express their emotions - often just saying to someone, 'I'm fed up today' can make a difference.

Set boundaries to help them find a balance

It might help your child to have routines and boundaries in place, like device-free meal times. Since tiredness can have such an impact, think about introducing a family agreement for devices, such as when they are used. For example, you could agree that they are left to charge in the living room and not used one hour before they go to bed, so they can wind down with a book. The more rested they are, the better.

Talk to them about social media and ‘reality’

Help your child to think critically about how the images they may come across on social media are likely to be edited and enhanced to look a certain way. Ask them why they think this might be the case and why people might select only their best and happiest moments to share on social media. Do they think this is a realistic depiction of the person's life? There are some great examples of pictures showing what's going on ‘outside the frame’ that you can explore with your teens.

Look for activities which lift their spirits

Sometimes a fun activity can act as a distraction and can help lift their mood - cook a meal together, listen to music, get outdoors. Physical activity often does the trick and walking, running, swimming gets people out of the house and into the fresh air - but even changing their bedroom furniture around can help.

Keep a check on the length and frequency of their low moods

It's important to keep a close eye on any mood changes. You know your child better than anyone - if you have any concerns that your child's low mood is becoming too frequent, lasts a long time or is having a worrying impact on the way they function each day, seek advice from your GP.

Further reading

[Depression and young people](#)

[Mental health and young people: the background](#)

[Helping your child get the sleep they need](#)

[Self-harm: facts for parents](#)

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