

Allowing Our Children Their Moods

At every age, our children's moods float through the day, from giddy and euphoric to feeling down and unfairly treated. This is unavoidable and how it must be. Please do not let yourself become alarmed (neither worried nor frustrated) about their changing moods, even though it is sometimes hard to prevent ourselves from feeling both worried and frustrated when our children are in a down or uncooperative mood.

During the preschool years, parents are usually very skilled at allowing children their moods. We understand they may be overtired or over-stimulated. Perhaps there were too many sweets, or a missed nap. With young children, parents rarely internalize their child's mood. That is, it is unlikely for a parent of a three-year-old to suspect that the child's meltdown at grandma's after a long day of visiting was due to a deliberate plan to ruin the parent's day or a lack of appreciation for how hard the parent works to keep family life running smoothly.

With older children, it becomes more difficult to keep ourselves out of their moods. The nine-year-old whines about a change of plan. An eleven-year old is crabby and engages in a power struggle over a small chore. A teenager holds back from the parent, answering loving questions with curt, one-word answers. These are the times when it is important to allow our children their moods.

Their mood is not supposed to cause our mood to change. We knew this when they were very young. We never threw a temper tantrum when our preschoolers threw themselves face down on the floor and began pounding with flailing fists and feet. Why does this become so challenging? How can we be so good at this early on and then, as they grow and develop, we lose a skill we didn't even realize we had?

Perhaps what happens is our expectations of how children should be changes. Our babies are born so completely dependent on us, so fragile, that we are totally accepting of their neediness, their demands and their moods. By the time they are in third or fourth grade, without realizing it, we may now expect them to understand that the plan for the day sometimes will be changed by an illness or a car problem. We may expect a sixth or seventh grader to appreciate how much work needs to get done in a family and to feel a commitment and responsibility to do

their fair share. And with our teenagers, we may be impatient for them to be as grownup emotionally as they are physically.

This tells us more about us than it tells us about our children. Whenever our moods are dictated by their moods, it suggests that we are not in charge of our own moods. And if at our age it is still hard to be in charge of our moods, we can be compassionate for how much harder it must be for our children and teenagers to be in charge of their moods.

And the ability to be in charge of our mood transcends parenting. This skill helps us in our marriages, in the workplace and in our volunteer work. If our partner is in a bad mood, it is important for us not to match that mood with one of our own. If we are working with someone who is a complainer, it is helpful for us to stay on our side of the dotted line that separates us. They are allowed their moods. We are allowed to stay in our good mood, with our calm feelings, in the presence of a spouse, coworker or child who is in a different mood.

When our children need reminders about manners, the importance of chores or a consequence about a behavioral issue, may we be there for them with what they need and may we be able to stay in our usual calm, reassuring mood.