

Mother Nurture

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Helping "Moody" Kids

Sometimes our 3-year-old is cheerful, but little things can always set him off, and then he seems grumpy and "blue" for longer than it seems like he should. Not to get paranoid, but depression runs in my husband's family, and I'm already starting to wonder about our son.

For starters, please know that it's extremely rare for a preschooler to be clinically depressed, unless something seriously traumatic has happened. It sounds more like your son is just vulnerable to getting bumped into a bad mood, and that it's harder than one would like for him to climb back out of his slump. And he sounds very normal; lots of other kids have similar tendencies.

So - what to do? Here are some basic principles, and parents with spirited or anxious children could probably benefit from trying these approaches as well.

- Make sure there's lots of nurturance - Kids like your son have extra needs for the stabilizing benefits of parental attention, but with everybody's busy schedules these days, it's easy sometimes for a child to get lost in the shuffle. Ask yourself, how many minutes a day is each of my children getting *quality* one-on-one attention from me? From my

partner? If it's less than 20 minutes a day per child per parent (and ideally, there'd be much more time), that's going to create problems.

- Encourage the child to soak in happy experiences - Depending on her age, find ways to help her take good moments into herself, so she builds up a positive emotional memory. Moody, spirited, and anxious children particularly need to access positive feelings inside in order to soothe themselves, calm down, and not give up when life's hard. Have her imagine she's a sponge absorbing good feelings, or that she's got a treasure chest in her heart for them. Try spending a few minutes each night before bed reviewing the day and recalling or thinking about things that make her feel good - and then have her soak them in.
- Keep stress down - Stress seems to roll right off the backs of some kids, but that's the exception, not the rule, and moody, anxious, or spirited kids are like human velcro when it comes to stress. Make a serious effort to avoid long days of childcare, overscheduling, too few breaks, and inappropriate expectations. Also try to hold your temper, since the single biggest stressor for most young children is their mom's or dad's anger.
- Ask the preschool teacher, a trusted friend, or a counselor for advice - A second pair of eyes might see things you don't that could be affecting your child (marital problems? a pushy big brother? too hectic at home? too much yelling? a bully at school?) and have some good ideas about what could help.
- Maintain good general nutrition - The guidelines are obvious but worth repeating: Protein with every meal, especially breakfast (no sweet cereal, toast with jam, or Pop Tarts!); if your child's in preschool, find out how long he goes there without a protein-rich snack. Low sugar, especially in drinks. Fresh fruit and vegetables, and whole grains.

- Watch out for food allergies - A surprising number of children are allergic to foods made from the gluten grains (e.g., wheat, oats, rye, barley), milk, or eggs - even if they do not have obvious symptoms (though a routinely runny nose and/or dark circles under the eyes are clues).

Try completely eliminating foods from one of these sources for ten days, and see if there is a marked improvement in mood, resilience, energy, etc. If not, move on to eliminating foods from another group. (If you're not quite sure, on one occasion give the child a lot of the food after the ten days and see if there is an obvious return of symptoms.) Alternately, you could do a food sensitivity panel (requiring a blood draw, ouch) with a licensed health practitioner who is experienced in its analysis.

If you've determined that there is, indeed, a food allergy, yes, it's a pain in the neck, but better to know than to be in the dark. There truly are plenty of alternative, tasty foods; we know this from personal experience, since our son is allergic to wheat, etc.

- Give a basic, high-quality supplement - In a perfect world, all children would get the nutrition needed for optimal health (beyond being merely not-sick). But in the real world, few get all the vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients they need. Therefore, look for a high-quality "multi" (the best are found at your health food store) in a form that your child will take.

- Consider specific supplements - Two nutrients have a particular benefit for mood issues, and they're listed just below with recommended dosages. Since these are natural substances the body is used to (and in fact, needs to survive), they generally have no side effects, and are very safe to use.

- Essential fatty acids - We suggest "molecularly distilled" fish oils (flax oil is an option for vegetarians, but it's often just not as effective as fish oil, alas). Try about half a teaspoon a day for a young child, either liquid (if they'll take it, perhaps mixed

in their food, but not heated), or in small capsules; Nordic Naturals is an excellent brand.

- B vitamins - Deficits in all of the B-vitamins have been shown to lower mood; and vitamins B-6 and B-12, and folic acid are particularly important. Try to get your child to swallow a high potency B-complex pill, ideally in the morning (it could be a little stimulating), and don't worry about the natural result of turning his urine bright yellow. You could also try B-12, which is placed under the tongue to dissolve.

- Maybe try 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP) - You've probably heard of serotonin, the neurotransmitter that has a major role in regulating mood. The body builds it from the amino acid, tryptophan, and the next-to-last step is 5-HTP. You can get this supplement in any health food store, and it has good research support for mild depression in adults. It's smart to be cautious about anything that affects a developing child's brain, but if you've tried everything else and there are still problems, for a child 6 or older (perhaps younger if you're working with a licensed, nutritionally-oriented health practitioner) you might consider 50 milligrams a day, taken in the morning.

- Take good care of yourself, and your marriage - It's a simple fact: the best way to support your child's well-being is to take good care of your own, and to keep teamwork and intimate friendship alive with your mate. Moody children bring extra stresses to their parents: a special reason to nurture yourself.

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