S9E3- Low Mood in Kids: What Helps and What Doesn't

Hello and welcome back to The Resilient Kid Podcast with me, Ashley Costello .

This week is often referred to as Blue Monday — the idea that January brings lower mood, less motivation, and a general sense of heaviness. I think a lot of us set off on New Year's Eve with resolutions… new year, new me, new goals — all that malarkey. And then we hit the third week of January.

Now, whether or not we believe in Blue Monday as a single day, what is very real is that January is a time when many kids feel flatter, quieter, more irritable, and more withdrawn .

Go back to episode one of this year and listen to why January in particular is hard for all of us — parents, carers, kids, and teens. But what we often notice is: parents and carers see it at home, teachers see it in the classroom, and the worry sounds like:

"They're just not themselves," or "They seem low, but I don't know why… is this something I should be concerned about?"

We get a real rise in referrals — parents and teachers reaching out — so today's episode is especially helpful in understanding low mood, what's happening in the brain, what helps, what doesn't, and how we can respond in ways that support rather than add pressure.

So let's get into it.

Low Mood Isn't Laziness or a Bad Attitude

First, let's be really clear about something: low mood in children does not usually look like lying on the sofa saying, "I feel sad." If it did, it would be easier.

It often looks like:

• irritability

• being withdrawn

• tiredness

• lack of motivation (homework or anything else)

• tearfulness over small things (or what seems small to us)

• less tolerance to challenge

• more conflict (especially with siblings)

For educators, you might notice:

• reduced engagement

• slower work

• zoning out

• more playground conflict

• that queue by your desk getting bigger after lunch, sorting misunderstandings

• shutdown

From a brain perspective, this makes sense.

Before we go further, I want to say this clearly: if your child or teen has a very, very low mood lasting longer than two to three weeks, go to the doctor. Depression is different from low mood.

And with teens, it's tricky — because if I listed teen behaviour and compared it to the DSM symptoms for depression, there's a big overlap. That doesn't mean we don't take it seriously. Please seek help if there are no moments of enjoyment, no excitement, and the low mood persists beyond two to three weeks.

What's Happening in the Brain?

When mood is low, the brain's reward and motivation systems are quieter. They don't shut down, but they turn down — while the stress response system becomes more active. It's like a weighing scale: high stress, lower reward.

So children aren't choosing not to try — their brains are working with less emotional energy.

Low mood is closely linked to how the brain processes stress, safety, reward, and connection .

A few key things:

• The prefrontal cortex (focus, emotional regulation, problem solving) works less efficiently when stress is high. That's why kids and teens might give up quickly, struggle to concentrate, and seem less resilient.

• The amygdala (the alarm system) can become more sensitive in January — because we're tired, sleep is disrupted, we're catching up after Christmas, academic pressures creep in, and the mornings are darker.

Even when nothing obvious is wrong, this can lead to emotional flatness. Teens might say, "I feel numb, I don't feel anything." You'll see irritability, withdrawal — and it's easy to label it as drama, but from a brain perspective it can be self-protection .

Why January Makes Low Mood More Likely

It helps to see January as a context , not a cause.

January often includes:

• reduced daylight (affects serotonin and melatonin)

• disrupted sleep

• academic pressure (SATs talk, mocks, GCSEs, assessments)

• fewer breaks to look forward to (half term feels far away)

• the emotional rollercoaster and comedown after Christmas

Kids often don't have the language to say, "I feel flat and overwhelmed." Unless they've had support — like therapy or a programme like ours — they may not recognise it, let alone say it out loud. So they show it.

That's why we often see more referrals, more behavioural concerns, and more anxiety from parents about what's going on.

What Helps?

So what genuinely supports children experiencing low mood?

1) Predictability and safety

Low mood improves when the brain feels less uncertain .

For parents and carers:

• keep routines simple and steady

• reduce unnecessary demands

• reduce choice

• be emotionally predictable (hard, but powerful)

For teachers:

• clear expectations

• predictable lesson structure (how you start, what happens next, how you end)

• calm, consistent responses

• visual timetables where helpful

Predictability reduces cognitive load and helps the brain feel safe.

2) Connection before challenge

Children with low mood need connection before motivation . Connection first, motivation second.

Try:

• “I’ve noticed you seem a bit quieter lately — are you okay?”

• “I’m here if you’re getting overwhelmed.”

• “You don’t have to push through alone.”

A quick check-in can be more powerful than encouragement to “try harder”.

And for secondary teachers especially — I know you don’t have the same time as primary. But asking about hobbies, what they enjoyed over Christmas, what they’re proud of, and then remembering it and asking again… that means a huge amount to kids. Taking an interest really works.

3) Adjust demand (temporarily)

This isn’t lowering standards forever — it’s matching demand to capacity.

In school:

• chunk work down

• movement breaks

• thinking time before starting

At home:

• reduce after-school overload

• don’t stack too many activities on the same nights

• be wary of tutoring plus sport plus extra commitments all at once

There’s nothing wrong with: “Let’s try this for 12 weeks and review.”

4) Regulation before reasoning

Support the body first — lift the mood through the nervous system:

• movement

• fresh air

• warmth

• grounding

• breathing

And warmth matters more than people realise. I say this to teachers a lot: kids come in after break, they're cold, and they can't regulate their temperature the same way adults can. If they're cold, they'll struggle to learn, struggle to concentrate, and are more likely to go into fight/flight.

Breathing helps too — oxygen boosts mood. If your child is low, make a hot chocolate and before they drink it, get them to breathe it in — three, four, five deep breaths. Smell it first. You're getting oxygen into the brain and calming the body.

What Doesn't Help (Even If It's Well-Intended)

This part is really important — especially if you grew up with these sayings.

Avoid:

• "You've got nothing to be sad about."

• "Try harder."

• "Be grateful."

• "Others have it worse."

These add shame and pressure and can invalidate their internal experience.

Also:

• don't over-reassure or jump straight into fixing it (it can accidentally communicate "your feelings are too much")

• don't punish low-energy behaviour (behaviour driven by low mood needs support, not sanctions)

When to Keep an Eye on It

Low mood is often temporary and situational — it will pass. But keep an eye on:

• low mood persisting for weeks

• significant withdrawal (especially teens)

• sleep and appetite changes

• loss of interest in things they used to enjoy

• any concern about self-harm

If you're worried, reach out. You can message via socials or email me at ashley@theresilientkid.co.uk — me or one of the coaches will always have a chat.

Final Thoughts

Low mood in children isn't a parenting failure.

In parent check-ins, I often ask: "Do you want them happy or do you want them safe?" And parents say, "Can we not do both?" But it's not our job to keep our kids happy all the time — it's our job to keep them safe.

Low mood is a signal . Our job is to respond with understanding, predictability, steadiness, and a little less pressure while they recover — especially in January.

The most powerful thing we can offer isn't positivity. It's permission : permission to feel supported while things feel heavy.

That's it from me. Thank you for listening to The Resilient Kid Podcast . If this resonated, please share it with a parent, carer, teacher, or educator — because supporting our kids, no matter their age, is always a team effort.

And remember: behaviour is communication, mood is information, and connection changes everything.

Next week we're doing a round table on "behaviour is communication" and we'll have guests on that.

Take care. Lots of love from us to you here at The Resilient Kid. Bye for now.