

How to Help Kids Deal With Embarrassment

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Don't minimize their feelings, but do praise them for being resilient

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For most adults minor embarrassments are just a part of life — annoying, but inevitable and hardly a big deal. But for many kids, embarrassing experiences can be very upsetting and, in some cases, may lead to serious issues like [anxiety](#) and avoidance.

We can't protect our children from embarrassment, but we can help them [build the resilience and confidence](#) they need to deal with it in a healthy way.

Model behavior

Kids look to parents for cues on how to manage difficult emotions like embarrassment. “As parents we set the behavioral tone for our kids,” says Rachel Busman, PsyD, a clinical psychologist, “So when we’re helping children learn healthy emotional habits, the first step is to consider how we handle similar situations in our own lives.”

Taking a look at how you deal with embarrassing experiences at home will [help you set an example of healthy behavior](#) for your child.

- **Don't obsess:** If you tend to dwell on mistakes you've made (“I can't believe I did that!” “I could have died of embarrassment!”), it's more likely your child will do the same.
- **Stay calm:** If you lose your cool when an embarrassing situation happens to you, or react by becoming angry or upset, you're sending a message to your child that it's a big deal.
- **No teasing:** Kids accidentally do and say some very funny things, but it's important not to mock mistakes or poke fun at embarrassing incidents. If small embarrassments are treated with ridicule, kids may start associating even minor missteps with feelings of shame and humiliation. Teasing — even if it seems gentle — can be very upsetting to kids, especially if they're already feeling sensitive.

Take your child's embarrassment seriously

There's no yardstick for embarrassment. Something that sounds small to you — giving the wrong answer in class for example — may feel huge to your child.

If your child is embarrassed it's important not to dismiss their feelings, even if the situation that caused them sounds like no big deal.

“We naturally want to downplay embarrassing experiences by saying things like ‘it's not as bad as you think,’” says Dr. Busman. “But when kids are experiencing these big, really upsetting emotions that can feel like a brush-off.”

But don't overreact

If your child comes home upset, what they don't need is for you to get upset, too, or angry on their behalf. ("That sounds awful!" "Those kids should be ashamed of themselves for laughing!") And don't assume that they want or need you to do something about it. When a self-conscious child worries that a parent will overreact or make an embarrassing situation worse, they're likely to be reluctant to share their feelings.

"When a child is hurting, as parents we want to do all we can," says Dr. Busman, "but if your kid is feeling embarrassed, heaping more attention on the situation can make it worse, not better."

Praise positive skills

If your child shares an embarrassing situation with you, take care to validate their feelings, but don't dwell on them or over comfort. Instead, praise positive coping skills. If they made a mistake during a piano recital, praise them for staying focused and finishing the piece. Reframing negative experiences will help your child identify healthy reactions and *practice* them, building what we call [metacognitive skills](#). You could say: "I'm so sorry that happened today. I know it was upsetting but I am so proud of how you handled it. It takes a really brave person to keep playing when things are hard."

Create perspective

If your child fell in gym class and other kids laughed, it may seem to them as though *everyone* saw, *everyone* laughed and no one will ever forget it — *ever*.

Of course you know that's not true but kids, especially younger ones, often struggle to see beyond their own feelings, which can make embarrassing situations feel like front-page news. "Kids can be egocentric," explains Dr. Busman, "so when something embarrassing happens to your child it can feel like everyone is thinking about it as much as they are, when in reality most kids will have moved on by the next day."

Learning to put their feelings and experiences in context will help your child gain perspective and build resilience.

- **Unpack:** Help your child take a metacognitive approach to their feelings by asking open-ended questions. For example: Your child isn't the only one who's ever fallen down in gym class, so you could begin by asking how they felt when other kids did the same thing. Learning to put their own experiences in context can help your child start to see embarrassing situations from a better angle.
- **Share:** Sharing examples from your own life will help normalize embarrassment. "I dropped my handbag at the grocery store the other day. It practically exploded all over the floor. Everyone laughed, but then several people helped pick things up."
- **But don't compare:** Offering perspective is good but be careful to avoid comparing your experiences with your child's. ("You think that's bad, when your brother was your age...") Your child may end up feeling like their experiences are unimportant — or not serious enough to warrant how upset they're feeling — which can make them feel worse for not being tougher.
- **Let your child take the lead:** Sometimes questions are helpful, but there may be times when your child just doesn't want to talk about it. "Letting kids take the lead is important," says Dr. Busman. "If your child says, 'I don't want to talk about it' or seems too upset, don't push." Embarrassment is a big feeling and sometimes kids just need space to cool down.

Helping your child gain perspective without minimizing their feelings will make it easier for them to move past negative experiences — and give them an important tool for building self-awareness in the future.

When to step in

Embarrassing situations happen to everyone from time to time, but if your child regularly comes home from school upset, or has a major change in behavior or mood, there may be something more serious going on.

- **Bullying:** Unfortunately, kids aren't always kind. Most children will be made fun of at some point during their lives. Sporadic episodes of embarrassment are unpleasant — but not unusual. However, if your child regularly reports being teased or humiliated by their peers — especially kids who are bigger, older or more “popular” — there's a chance they're being [bullied](#), and it's time to step in.
- **Behavioral changes:** Feeling a little down or anxious after an embarrassing incident is normal, but lingering behavioral changes — [not sleeping](#), low appetite, excessive worrying — are not.
- **Overreacting or obsessing:** If your child's reaction to something embarrassing seems out of proportion to the situation or they seem unable to move past it, they may need support.
- **Avoidance:** Most kids who've had an embarrassing experience feel reluctant about returning to the class or social group where the problem occurred for a little while, but persistent avoidance is cause for concern. Some signs to watch for include frequently being too sick to go to school or asking to go to the nurse during a particular class, making excuses to avoid seeing friends, cutting class, skipping extracurricular activities or refusing to attend school entirely.

Embarrassment and social anxiety

For some kids, fear of being embarrassed itself can become a serious issue. If a child seems to live in perpetual fear of embarrassment — even when there's no obvious reason to worry — they may be experiencing [social anxiety](#).

Social anxiety usually occurs in children who've reached *adolescence*,

but it can develop earlier. A child with social anxiety panics at the thought of participating in day-to-day activities because they worry chronically about what other people will think of them, obsess on how they appears to others, or fear making a mistake.

These fears can be very debilitating. For kids who see potential for humiliation at every turn, even basic interactions can feel like a minefield, and social, school and personal interactions often suffer. Withdrawal is common, but kids with social anxiety are also prone to lashing out when the threat of embarrassment overwhelms them.

The good news is that kids who develop social anxiety respond well to [cognitive behavioral therapy](#), and with help can return to their normal activities.

Life lessons

It's natural to want to protect your child from experiences that are hurtful or upsetting, but in the end, the best way for your child to build [coping skills](#) is through experience — with a side of support.

“Being embarrassed is part of life,” says Dr. Busman. “It’s tempting to try to shield our kids from difficult things, but in reality learning how to deal with those experiences in a healthy way is a skill that will serve your child well as they grow up.”

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