

LOW and SLOW...
(Bolick, 2001)

LOW and SLOW refers to the way in which we should approach children and adolescents who are in distress (or becoming so). It is based on our understanding of the “fight or flight” response and what serves to calm people and other mammals. It is also based upon the recognition that most of us become distressed when our children are distressed or disorganized. In these situations, most of us find that our own engines “rev.” While this is understandable, it doesn’t help our kids. In fact, agitated or intense behavior on the part of the adults usually intensifies the distress and disorganization of our kids. **LOW and SLOW** is a strategy for helping us modify our own behavior in order to give our children and ourselves a chance of settling down.

LOW...

- Lower your body so that your eyes are at or below the eye level of the child. If the child or adolescent might hit or kick you in the course of his distress, make sure that you stay at a safe distance.
- Lower your voice—both in volume and in pitch. Keep your tone matter of fact, even if you’re screaming on the inside.
- Lower the complexity of your language. Speak in short sentences. Don’t ask a lot of questions. Don’t preach.

SLOW...

- Slow down your own heart rate and breathing rate. This is usually accomplished most easily by taking slow deep breaths (count to yourself “In-2-3-4, Out-2-3-4-5-6”).
- Slow down your rate of speech. Pause between sentences. In these situations, I try to speak no more than once every 30 to 60 seconds.
- Slow down your movements. We mammals feel threatened by sudden movement. If you must move quickly (such as when a child is in danger), try to do so in full view of the child.
- Slow down your agenda. Take your time. It takes as long as it takes. If you (or the child) need to be somewhere soon, let someone else know that you may be late. If you can’t do that, announce calmly to the child that you will have to make a change at a certain time. Make a transition plan such as, “We can sit quietly until the next bell rings to tell us that your classmates are coming in. Then we’ll take ten deep breaths together and move to a more private spot.”

THE NEXT STEP...

Once the adolescent begins to settle down, you can make objective and descriptive comments such as, “Boy, were you angry. Your face was redder than I’ve ever seen it.”

- Try to refrain from asking questions at this point. The load of answering “why” questions can re-trigger fight-or-flight.
- If you have an idea about what happened, make a guess. “I’m not sure because I’m not in your body. (pause) But it looked like you got really agitated because the mall was so noisy and crowded.” Always propose your idea in the spirit of a hypothesis.
- If the adolescent starts to talk about his/her reactions, listen. Don’t try to fix things or offer solutions.
- Do the problem solving and talk about consequences (if any) at a later time, after everyone is calm.

DON’T...

- Try to process the situation or teach a lesson when the adolescent is still agitated or distressed.
- Announce negative consequences at this point.
- Make threats such as “If you don’t settle down right now, I’ll ...”
- Think you’re letting the adolescent “escape” anything. None of us thinks and remembers clearly when we’re in a state of agitation. Talking about morals, values, and consequences at this point just ends up frustrating the adult.
- Worry about what other people will think.
- Think this will go on forever. This is one strategy in which “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Through the adult’s use of LOW and SLOW, the adolescent learns that there are people who can bear witness to their agitation and be helpful. It makes it easier for them to seek help in the future.

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