

< Talking with your child

What should I do when my child says "I'm dumb"?



By The Understood Team



At a Glance

- If your child says “I’m dumb” or “I’m stupid,” how you respond can make a big difference.
- Acknowledge your child’s feelings, and try to stay calm.
- Avoid replies like “That’s not true” or “Don’t say that.”

It may be one of the most painful things to hear your child say: “I’m dumb” or “I’m stupid.” Your immediate reaction might be “No you’re not!” But is that a helpful way to respond?

How you respond can have an important impact on your child’s **self-esteem** and motivation. Here, five experts weigh in on what to do if your child says “I’m dumb.”

What’s the most helpful way to react?

Mark Griffin, PhD: Acknowledge your child’s feelings. You don’t want to just brush the concerns away or simply tell your child “that’s not true!” Your child knows you’ll say something encouraging because after all, that’s your job! Highlight your child’s **strengths** and give concrete reasons why things will get better.

Donna Volpitta, EdD: Focus on the idea that this feeling is a reaction to a situation, not a trait. It’s not about being smart or not smart. Your child is feeling **frustrated about specific things**. Try to understand what those things are.

Bob Cunningham, EdM: The most helpful way to react depends a lot on the situation. Say your child is having difficulty with a task, like homework. In that case, a matter-

of-fact response like: "I know this is tricky, but you can do it" usually works best.

Sometimes, though, kids make statements about being dumb or feeling stupid seemingly out of the blue. Or they may bring it up a few times over a couple of days. In those cases, having a short conversation usually helps.

In any of these instances, an overly emotional response from you likely won't make the situation better. It's important to be supportive and caring. But it's just as important to be realistic. Otherwise, what you say may not seem credible to your child.

Annie Fox, MEd: Before getting too upset and running the risk of overreacting, remember that context is everything. Take on the role of a detective with a mission to find out as much information as possible before weighing in.

For example, does "I'm dumb" reflect your child's true feelings? Or was your child just frustrated by one thing in particular? Is your child repeating an insult from a classmate or sibling? Calmly talk to your child and find out as much as you can.

What are helpful things to say?

Bob Cunningham: Say something like, "I'm sorry you're having a hard time. I know it's frustrating, but that doesn't mean you're dumb." If your child was reacting to something that's challenging, you can often leave it at that and move on.

If you need a longer conversation, open it by saying, "It makes me sad when you say that, because I know it isn't true. You're great at basketball, math, and dancing. So tell

me why you feel this way.” This opens up the conversation and lets you get a sense of what’s going on.

Donna Volpitta: Respond calmly to your child’s comment by saying, “What makes you feel that way?” By doing that, you open up the conversation. From there you can focus on understanding your child’s feelings and take action.

Jenn Osen-Foss, MAT: Use “I” statements like “I don’t believe that’s true.” If your child is in grade school, explain that having trouble with something doesn’t mean you’re not smart. If your child is older, talk about the specific challenges in more detail.

Mark Griffin: Use clear, encouraging responses. You can also acknowledge the difficulties your child has in some areas.

But be sure to consistently reinforce your child’s strengths.

Honest praise does wonders for kids. You can say things like, “You’re a smart kid who sometimes has trouble with reading. You know more about sports than anyone in the family and can fix anything around the house.”

Annie Fox: Ask what your child means by the word “dumb.” Once you get clearer on your child’s meaning, ask “What’s making you feel that way?” Or “What just happened that made you feel ‘dumb’?” Calm, respectful, open-ended questioning can put your child at ease and allow for a more open talk.

Remind your child that there are different ways of being “smart,” too.

What *shouldn't* you say?

Donna Volpitta: Your immediate natural reaction when your child says “I’m dumb” may be to say “No, you’re not!” But that’s not very helpful. It doesn’t encourage a discussion – it’s more likely to end it. Also, you’re not going to change your child’s feeling by contradicting it.

Bob Cunningham: When your child isn’t feeling confident, it’s tempting to talk about your own struggles or the struggles of siblings or friends. This usually doesn’t make the situation better. It’s more helpful to focus on your child’s frustration or feelings.

Jenn Osen-Foss: Try not to sound accusatory, like exclaiming “Don’t say that!” Consider your tone when you respond. Avoid raising your voice or scolding. That could undermine the message you’re trying to share. Also, try not to respond to your child by saying “You’re wrong.”

Mark Griffin: Short, simple “I’m your parent and I love you” statements may not be helpful. Kids need to know why you think they’re really not “dumb,” but are capable. If they don’t believe they’re smart, they need constant reinforcement of why *you* think they are. They want examples to hang on to during their struggles.

Give examples of when you saw your child doing something well. The more specific you are, the better. Kids often feel like challenges are overwhelming – that they’re never going to get it right. It’s important to acknowledge when something is a challenge. But it’s not an impossible one.

For more ideas, get tips on [how to talk to your child with empathy](#).

Key Takeaways

- Try to find out what led your child to say “I’m dumb.”
- Honest praise does wonders: “You’re a smart kid who sometimes has trouble with this one thing.”
- Remind your child of strengths, giving specific examples of things your child does well.

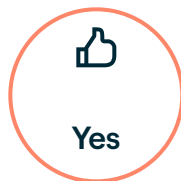
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About the Author

The Understood Team is made up of passionate writers and editors. Many of them have kids who learn and think differently.

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