

Low and Slow

“LOW and SLOW” refers to the way in which we should approach children and adolescents who are in distress (or are becoming so). It is based on our understanding of the flight-or-flight response. It is also based on the recognition that we become distressed when a child becomes distressed. In these situations we find our own engines rev. While this is understandable it doesn’t help our kids. It actually increases their anxiety and agitation. LOW and SLOW is a strategy for helping us to modify our own behaviour in order to give our children and ourselves time and space to settle down.

LOW...

- Lower your body so that your eyes are at or below the eye level of the child. If the adolescent might kick out or hit at this point keep your distance.
- Lower your voice – both in volume and pitch. Keep your tone matter of fact, even if you are 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 achieved by taking slow deep breaths.
- 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 can feel threatened by sudden movements. If we have to move quickly (as when a child is in danger) do so in full view of the young person.
- 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 know you will be late.

THE NEXT STEP...

- Once the young person has begun to settle down, you can make objective and descriptive comments such as “You looked really angry. Your face was redder than I’ve ever seen it before.”
- Try to refrain from asking questions at this point. “Why” questions may still trigger fight-or-flight.
- If you have an idea about what happened, make a guess. “I’m not sure what happened, because I’m not in your body (pause) but it looks like you got really agitated because you are really frustrated at home. Always propose your idea in the spirit of a hypothesis.
- If the young person tries to talk about their situation or problem just listen. Don’t try to offer solutions at this point.
- It is possible you can look at problem solving later when everyone is calm.

DON’T...

- Try to process the situation or teach a lesson when the young person is still stressed.
- Announce negative consequences at this point.
- Make threats such as “if you don’t settle down I’ll...”
- Think you are letting the young person “escape” anything. None of us thinks clearly when we are agitated. Talking about morals, values and consequences at this point just end up frustrating the adult.
- Worry about what other people will think.
- Think this will go on for ever. 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, young people begin to learn there are people who can bear witness to their agitation and frustrations. It makes it easier to help them in the future.