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6 ways to help your child thrive socially in middle school



(Jennifer Potter/for The Washington Post)

By **Phyllis Fagell** April 14, 2020 at 9:00 a.m. EDT

The room full of tweens at Marymount International School in London voiced many of the same concerns as my middle-schoolers in the District. “Sometimes, I pretend to know what my friends are talking about just to fit in.” “I wish I had more confidence.” “My best friend iced me out.”

Margaret Frazier, the headmistress, had given me an hour to meet with the students alone so they could unload worries. As we dove into the topic of friendship, I shared statistics that normalized the social churn.

“Only [1 percent](#) of seventh-grade friendships are still intact in 12th grade, and more than two-thirds of friendships shift during the first year of middle school,” I told them.

“Every single one of you is going to get rejected at some point, and it’s not because there’s something wrong with you. This is just a time when kids are figuring out how to choose — and be — a good friend.”

These fragile, unstable friendships are suddenly at the epicenter of their lives, so perhaps it’s not surprising that “80 percent of adolescents report feeling lonely at some point,” said Lydia Denworth, author of [“Friendship: The Evolution, Biology, and Extraordinary Power of Life’s Fundamental Bond.”](#)

Parents can’t discount the importance of peer relationships to tweens, but it’s important to not overstep and solve problems for them. As one sixth-grade girl at Marymount told me: “I want my parents to talk to me about my friendship issues, but not get too involved.”

Here’s how you can help your child acquire six key skills they need to thrive socially in middle school.

Distinguish between neutral and threatening behavior

Jaana Juvonen, a developmental psychologist at the University of California at Los Angeles, found that a child who doesn’t have friends in sixth grade is going to feel more threatened in seventh grade, and is more likely to experience depression and anxiety in eighth grade.

If a middle-schooler feels targeted or isolated, that can have a psychological ripple effect, Denworth explained. “They feel like an animal at the edge of the herd, and it’s literally less safe to be on the edge of the herd.” They also can seem more awkward, because one of the first things to go when you feel threatened is social skills. Tweens are prone to misinterpreting neutral behavior as negative or hostile, so help your child realistically appraise a situation. If your daughter is wounded that a classmate didn’t invite her to a birthday party, for instance, you might want to remind her that she didn’t invite that kid to her party.

Psychologist Mary Alvord, author of [“Conquer Negative Thinking for Teens,”](#) recommends asking evocative questions that get your child thinking more expansively. You might say: “Tell me about a specific time when you didn’t invite someone. Where were you? Who else was there? How did you say it? Why did you exclude them?”

“In middle school, it’s very much, ‘How can they do this to me?’ ” Alvord said. “It doesn’t matter if they just did the same thing to someone else.”

Regroup after experiencing social setbacks

Although it’s important to help children assume positive intent, help them process their hurt feelings when a friend drops them. “Middle school friendships can feel both euphorically intense and frighteningly transitory,” said Jessica Lahey, author of [“The Gift of Failure.”](#) “The rush of finding a new person, with all her fascinating and interesting traits, can feel a little like falling in love, and when that relationship ends, as so many other experimental endeavors do, it can be as painful as romantic heartbreak.”

Validate your children's sorrow, share your own social setbacks and ask them what they gained through having experienced the friendship, whether good or bad. As Lahey noted: "Helping kids gain ownership over their friendship decisions can give them a sense of competence and self-efficacy, two of the most important building blocks for adulthood."

Be careful not to overfreight the importance of one specific friend or peer group. "We want to teach kids that groups can merge and cross over, and that there are layers to friends," said social worker Katie Hurley, author of "[The Happy Kid Handbook](#)." "Kids can become hyper-focused on the idea that everyone has to be a best friend, but the floaters are the most successful when they get to high school, because they can enter a new group."

Reframe risk-taking in social settings

Adults can underestimate the courage it takes for a tween to talk to an older student or join a sports team with unfamiliar teammates. Tell your child that risk-taking isn't about the absence of fear; it's about leveraging other, equally potent emotions. For instance, if they're tired of waiting for an invitation, their impatience might motivate them to make the first move.

Have them start with small risks to build their confidence. Hurley once worked with a seventh-grade boy who struggled to enter group conversations. He would tell her: "I wasn't included; they didn't want me there." She'd freeze-frame him in that moment when he didn't take a chance, then ask him to close his eyes, take a deep breath and reframe the scenario.

"Some kids get one tiny perceived rejection and they're out," Hurley said. "But maybe those kids had just taken a math test and were under stress, or they were deep in conversation."

Build their capacity for compassion

Middle-schoolers who can tune into others' needs and feelings are more likely to develop satisfying, reciprocal friendships, but tweens are vulnerable and insecure. And when stress builds, bullying peaks and compassion wanes.

"Kids dial empathy down when anxious because they're in survival mode — they have to take care of themselves," said educational psychologist Michele Borba, author of "[UnSelfie](#)." What looks like lackluster empathy also could reflect a skills deficit — they simply don't know what to do. To address that missing piece, Borba urges parents to arm kids with nonjudgmental phrases that convey compassion, such as, "That happened to me, too," "You don't deserve that" and "You look sad; is that how you're feeling?" As she noted: "The bottom line — friendship is everything to middle-school-age kids. They do care desperately about each other."

Assist them in choosing their battles

Tweens often need help managing conflict, but parents can make a situation bigger and more stressful if they, say, begin texting other parents. "Parents may take things

personally if they have their own painful memories of rejection,” Hurley said. “Try to separate those feelings from your kids. You can give them emotional support, but they need to learn how to cope and heal from the pain.”

Parents can help kids make sense of a situation and formulate a response. Pose questions such as: “Is this a relationship you hope to repair? Does this situation involve you, or are you a peripheral player? Do you have any power to solve it? Could your plan end up hurting you or someone else?”

Hurley will say to kids: “Own your 2 percent, even if you believe it’s 98 percent the other kid’s fault.” On social media, for example, someone might unintentionally get left out. “Maybe one girl sees that she wasn’t invited and feels deeply hurt, but the other girls don’t own it and apologize,” she said. “They try to snap it out or text it out.” If children are waging war with peers online, encourage them to put down their phone, take a break and resolve it in person after everyone has a chance to cool down.

Recognize the gap between intent and impact

As kids get older, communication moves from being more explicit to more implicit, and some kids have difficulty making that transition, said Stacey Ellison Glasgow, a speech-language pathologist and associate director of school services for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. “They might think, ‘I must have missed something, because I’m not sure why that person is annoyed or angry.’ ”

Alvord recalls one boy in middle school who complained that kids told him his jokes weren’t funny, so she offered concrete advice. “I said, ‘Well, you could learn some funny jokes, or you can stop trying to be funny.’ ” She also advised him to say three sentences, then stop and assess his conversation partner’s reaction. If the partner seemed bored or disengaged, then he had to ask an open-ended question or shift topics.

Parents can model how to make eye contact, listen without interrupting and interpret nonverbal cues. Ellison Glasgow explained that a parent might say, “The neighbor told me he wasn’t looking forward to doing yard work this spring, and then he looked at my yard with a grimace, so I thought maybe I need to take care of my leaves before they blow into his yard.” She said parents also can use movies to prompt a dialogue about social communication. “The examples aren’t personal, so the child is less likely to feel critiqued or judged.”

If your tween has difficulty getting their message across, tells stories that don’t make sense, experiences great frustration with peers and doesn’t understand why, or is limited in language use, consider reaching out to a therapist or speech-language pathologist. As Ellison Glasgow pointed out, different kids have different social needs, “but feeling fulfilled in friendship is a key element of quality of life for everyone.”

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