

Talking with Your Middle Grader



You've probably noticed that your middle grader doesn't tell you as much as he used to. It's normal for him to become busier — and more private — as he gets older. The good news? There's plenty you can do to stay close to your child and keep conversations flowing. And communication can make your relationship stronger and help him succeed in school.

Read these ideas from other parents who have done it.

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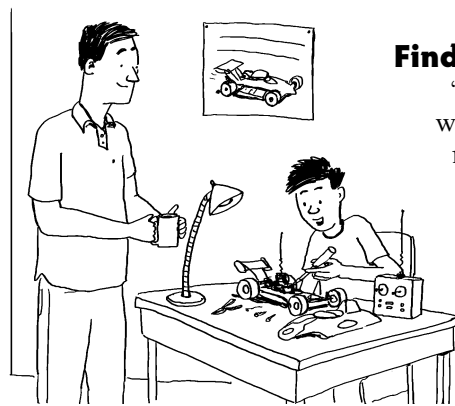
plays your drama club decided on for this year?" My questions don't always start a real conversation, but they definitely get us talking more."

Share an activity

"If I do something with my son that he enjoys, he's more likely to open up. For instance, sometimes I join Hunter to shoot hoops in the driveway after school. While we play, I'll chat casually about my day, and then he'll often share something about his. Or on weekends, we might go to an air show or a model train exhibit. I've discovered that when we're having fun together, he tends to talk more freely."

Ask her for advice

"My daughter Jade loves to get creative when she paints her nails. I once asked her to show me how she does fancy designs, and we wound up in a discussion that ended with her giving me a manicure. I realized that letting her be the expert could help us bond. Now, when I notice she has a knack for something, like making smoothies or using new apps, I ask her to teach me. It makes me feel more connected to her and gives us something to talk about."



Find the right time

"I used to try to chat with my son Matthew right after school or when he got home from a friend's house. A lot of times, he wasn't in the mood to talk. Lately I've been trying to wait until he's

more relaxed and rested, like after dinner or when his homework is finished. Or I'll bring him some tea or hot chocolate and casually ask what he's working on or if he has plans for the weekend. If I catch him at a time that's good for him, the conversation goes better."

Phrase questions carefully

"Every time I asked my daughter Teresa a question like 'How was school?' she would give me a one-word answer, and our discussion would go nowhere. So I realized I needed to ask specific questions, such as 'What's the most interesting thing you're learning in history?' or 'What do you think of the

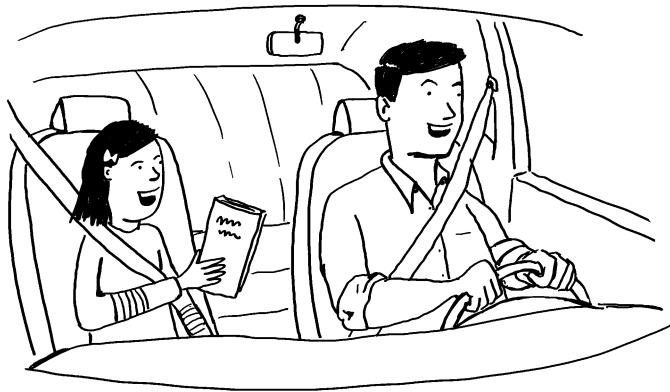
Stop to listen

"I'm very busy with my job and keeping the household running. When my son Zach would ask me something, I often acted like I was listening when really I wasn't. He realized this and told me it bothered him. Since then, I've made an effort to stop what I'm doing so he knows I care about what he's saying. And if I can't pause at that moment, I let him know when I'll be available, like after dinner is in the oven. Then, I make sure to follow through."

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Read the same book

“My daughter Kylie was reading a book that she couldn’t put down. When she finished, I decided to read it, too, and then we had a good conversation about it. We talked about how the main character handled challenges and how we felt about her choices. We also discussed the ending and whether we would have written it differently. I liked hearing her thoughts, and I think she felt good that I read the book based on her recommendation.”



Talk one-on-one

“It’s not always easy to listen to my seventh grader when his little brother and sister are running around. An article I read reminded me that even when kids get older, they still need one-on-one time with their parents. So I started looking for opportunities to spend time alone with Ryan while the younger ones nap or after their bedtime. He doesn’t always take me up on it, but when he does, I’m able to give him my undivided attention.”

Stay tuned

“Keeping up with pop culture has given me a way to talk to my daughter Jordan. She’s really into celebrities and music.

Every so often I watch a show with her or play her music when we’re in the car together. I’ve even picked up ‘tween’ magazines just to browse the latest news. That way, I can mention a new movie or hit album and ask her to tell me about it.”

Be patient

“My sixth-grade son, Andy, sometimes takes a while to get to his point, and I have the urge to jump in and finish his sentences. I find, though, that if I wait a little longer, he finishes his thought — and it’s often different from what I would have guessed. Now, I try to be patient, and I’ve been learning more about what is going on at school and with his friends.”

Discuss current events

“When I read a newspaper article that I think will interest my daughter Salma, I try to use it as a conversation piece. For instance, she loves animals and is concerned about the environment, so I clipped an article about endangered polar bears. It led to a good discussion about what’s being done to help the animals. We email each other articles, and our discussions about current events are giving us a way to connect.”



Serious conversations

Talking to your child about heavy topics like alcohol, drugs, or sex can be intimidating. These suggestions may help:

- Think of it as a continuing conversation rather than one big talk. Look for chances to bring topics up naturally (like when a TV character is caught drinking). Mention the subjects regularly as opportunities arise.
- Remember that it’s okay not to have all the answers. Ask for time to think something over, or say, “I don’t know. Let’s



look it up.” If you tell your tween you will get back to him with information, make a note to yourself so you’ll remember.

- Share your values firmly and clearly, but try not to lecture, or your middle grader may shut down. If he makes a comment you don’t agree with — say, he thinks kids should be allowed to get tattoos — you might ask, “Why do you think that?” Listen to his views, and explain your own. Point out that while he has the right to his opinion, your rules stand.

Middle Years

Reading and Writing in Content Areas



When you think of classes where your child needs strong reading and writing skills, you probably think of English or language arts. But reading and writing are crucial for learning science, social studies, math, and other subjects, too. Share these ideas with your youngster.

READING STRATEGIES

Help your child gain more knowledge when she reads with these tips for before, during, and after reading.

Before reading...

● Scan for main ideas

What will a textbook chapter cover? Before your middle grader starts to read, suggest that she notice the title, scan the headings, and look through the review questions at the end. These sections will let her know what main ideas (the most important things the author has to say about a topic) will be covered. Reading with a purpose in mind will improve her comprehension.

● Make a "KWL" chart

Encourage your child to create a chart that contains details about the subject. Have her divide a sheet of paper into three columns: "Know," "Want to know," and "Learned." She can list facts she already knows in



the first column (there are three branches of the federal government) and add things she wants to know in the second column (what the judicial branch does). Then, when she reads, she can write new information she learns in the last column and check on facts she wrote in the first one.

During reading...

● Ask questions

Readers who make up questions to answer as they read understand the material better. Your youngster can think about the main ideas and then ask himself questions that will help him read for supporting details. For instance, if a main idea is "Renewable energy comes in many forms," he might ask, "What are different forms of renewable energy?" Then, he can read for the details (geothermal, hydropower, solar, wind).

● Get the picture

Visualizing information may boost your middle grader's understanding. He might make a time line to track historical dates (inventions of the 19th century, the presidency of Abraham Lincoln). Or he could sketch out a word problem in math class. For example, to find the total square feet of carpet needed for two rooms, he could draw a rectangle for each room and label the length and width. Then, he can use it to

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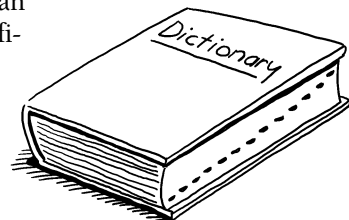
What's that word?

Tackling new information is easier when your child understands the words he's reading. Boost his vocabulary with these ideas:

- Pay attention to new words. They may appear in bold or italic type or in a separate box on the page.
- Learn definitions. Sometimes the meaning of a word is right in the same sentence. ("The least common denominator, or the smallest number that can be used as the denominator for both fractions, of $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{2}{3}$ is 6.") Other times,

reading the whole passage can make the meaning clear. Definitions may also be in a separate box on the page or in the book's glossary.

- Make a list. Write down new words and their definitions as you come across them. Keep the list on hand for easy reference.



Middle Years

write an equation. By multiplying the length and width of each one and adding the two results together, he'll discover how much carpet he will need for both rooms.

After reading...

● **Retell**

Have your child talk about what she read and learned. Let her lead the conversation by telling you the most interesting facts she discovered. Then, pose questions that will encourage her to give you details. For example, if she said, "Instrumental music was very popular during the Renaissance," you might ask her to name a few of the instruments. Discussing the information will help her remember more of what she learned.

● **Read it again**

Is there a section that confused her? Has she forgotten an explanation? Suggest that she reread. The extra practice will reinforce new vocabulary, provide an opportunity to find things she missed, and help her make sense of things she might not have understood the first time around.



WRITING TO LEARN

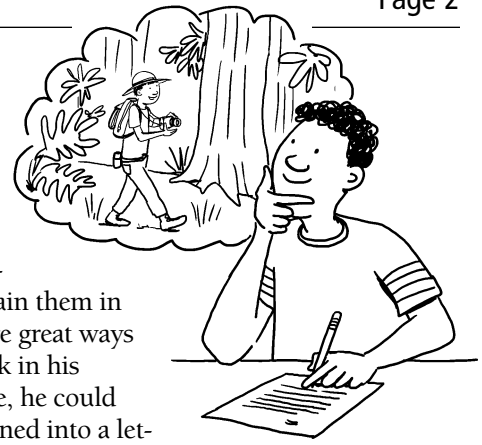
Writing is a hands-on way for your middle schooler to learn and remember information in every class. Try these creative ideas that make it fun to put ideas into writing.

● **Illustrated notes**

A picture might be worth a thousand words, especially if it's part of your child's notes. In science class, she might draw and label a flow chart to show how the water cycle works. In English, she could create comic strips and use vocabulary words in the dialogue bubbles. Adding an image to her words gives her one more way to connect with what she is learning.

● **Letter writing**

Putting information into a new format encourages your middle grader to think about main ideas, pull out important details, and explain them in his own words. All are great ways to make the facts stick in his memory. For example, he could turn what he has learned into a letter. Say he's studying Brazil in geography. He might imagine that he's a tourist visiting the country and write a letter to a grandparent about his trip. He could describe the monkeys, birds, and trees he saw when he walked through a rain forest, for example.



● **Study guides**

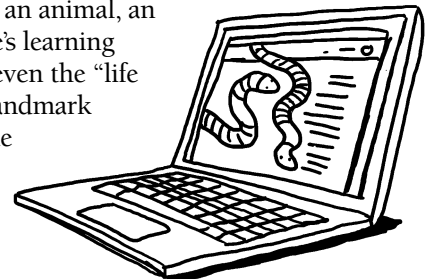
Making a study guide is a great way to prepare for a test. Suggest that your child create study guides as she reads textbook chapters. For instance, for a chapter on World War II, she can divide a sheet of paper into four sections ("causes," "major battles," "key people," and "outcomes"). Then, as she reads, she should hunt for details and write them in the correct section. Suggest that she use a different-colored pen for each topic and keep her notes brief (lists with three or four bullets work well).

● **Scrapbook of knowledge**

What did your middle grader learn this week? Have him make a scrapbook of the material, and he'll be more likely to understand—and enjoy—it. He could clip newspaper articles of current events his social studies class has discussed and write his own captions for them. If he's reading about nutritious foods in health class, he could create menus for healthy meals. He might also include step-by-step directions for his science fair project along with a photo of the finished project.

● **Unlikely biographies**

Your middle grader has probably read a biography of a historical figure—but anything can have a life story. Encourage her to write a short biography of a character from a novel she's reading in literature class (*Jane Eyre*). *Idea:* She could bring a 21st-century twist to her work by creating an imaginary Facebook page for Jane Eyre, with entries Jane might have written about her job as a governess or her wedding day and comments from other characters. Or your child could write a biography of an animal, an insect, or a plant she's learning about in science or even the "life story" of a famous landmark (Statue of Liberty, the Sphinx) that she's studying in social studies.



Middle Years

Giving and Getting Respect

Being respectful helps your middle grader get along with family members, teachers, and peers. And this important habit can lead to success in school and in the future. Encourage her to treat others well, use good manners, and follow rules.



Respect yourself

People who respect themselves believe that others should treat them well. Here are ways your tween can foster self-respect.

Stay true to yourself. Your child will earn self-respect by knowing who she is and standing by what she believes in. For instance, if she enjoys time to herself, she shouldn't feel pressured to say yes to every invitation to hang out with friends. If she doesn't think kids should smoke, she shouldn't act like cigarettes are cool. It might not always be easy, but she'll respect herself more in the long run.



Do your best. By working hard in school and at extracurricular activities, your tween demonstrates respect for herself. Explain that you want her to put effort into whatever she does.

For instance, doing homework carefully, studying for tests, and practicing her musical instrument regularly all show that she takes pride in her work.

Respect others

Your middle grader won't agree with everyone all the time. These ideas can help him respect people in different situations.

Model what you mean. Your child will learn by following your example. If he is disrespectful, use it as an opportunity to

model respect. Focus on his behavior ("I don't like the way you are speaking to me") rather than on *him* ("You are so rude!").

Tip: Reinforce his respectful behavior by pointing it out. For example, if he tells you he was upset when you mentioned his grades in front of his aunt, you might say, "I appreciate your waiting until we got home to tell me. Let's talk about it now."

Focus on words and actions. Ask your tween to consider how what he says and does affects others. Does he make people feel respected? For instance, if he gets a grade he doesn't understand, help him practice how to bring it up with his teacher using a respectful tone. ("I'm confused about why I got a C. Do you have time to explain it to me?") Or if he disagrees with a classmate about who should be elected student council president, he could focus on the issues rather than criticizing the candidates.

Idea: Have him think of people he looks up to and how they talk to and act toward others. They can help him understand what respect looks and sounds like.



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Mind your manners

Using basic manners communicates respect. Help your child make a good impression with these tips.

Practice everyday manners. Prepare your youngster for common situations by practicing polite behavior. For example, act out how to introduce someone. (“Natalie, this is Jack. Jack, Natalie.”) Or he can work on accepting compliments gracefully by smiling and saying, “Thank you.”

Discuss etiquette challenges. Brainstorm situations your tween might find himself in where he’s unsure what to do. Talk about what to do if someone gives him a birthday

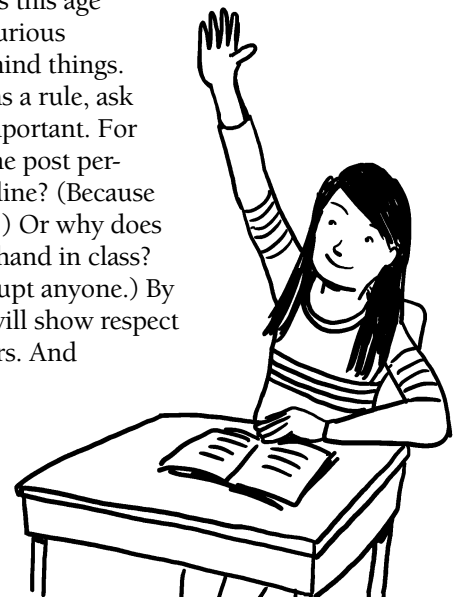
present and he already has the item. Explain that it’s possible to be both honest *and* polite by making a nice comment. (“This is my favorite color. Thanks!”) Or if he gets a phone call when he’s in line to order food, he could step outside to answer or return the call later.

Follow the rules

Abiding by rules shows respect for authority and can help your middle grader stay safe and get along with others.

Hold your child accountable. Show your tween that you take school and household rules seriously by expecting her to follow them. For example, if the school dress code says no tank tops, don’t allow her to wear them. The more you stand by rules, the more likely she is to respect them as well.

Explain rules. Kids this age are often genuinely curious about the reasons behind things. If your child questions a rule, ask why she thinks it’s important. For instance, why can’t she post personal information online? (Because strangers could see it.) Or why does she have to raise her hand in class? (So she doesn’t interrupt anyone.) By following rules, she will show respect for teachers and others. And when people feel respected, they are more likely to respect her in return.



Be a good sport

Student athletes who treat opponents, teammates, coaches, and officials with dignity show good character—and earn respect as a result. Share these ways your child can demonstrate respect on the field or court:

- Play by the rules, regardless of whether your actions can be seen by coaches or officials.
- Avoid “trash talking” to intimidate or put down opponents.
- Accept officials’ calls graciously, even if you don’t agree with them.



You can also set an example of respectful behaviors for your tween when you’re watching a sporting event with these tips:

- Offer encouragement (“Way to go!”), and refrain from booing or making negative remarks.
- Be polite to opposing teams and their fans. For example, say hello, or congratulate them on a win.
- Discuss concerns with your youngster’s coach privately, rather than in front of other players.

Middle Years

Homework 101

Middle school means more classes to juggle—and more homework assignments to manage. Help your youngster learn more and be successful in school by getting into a good homework routine from the start. Here's how.

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1. Make homework a habit

One of the best ways to make something a habit is to do it at the same time every day. Help your middle grader pick a homework time slot that works for him. It could be after dinner or right after he gets home from school. Have him experiment to find the best time and then stick with it daily—even if he has no assignments due the next day. He can use the time to review notes or textbook chapters for a test or to work on a long-term project.

2. Get focused

Encourage your youngster to pick a homework spot where she won't be distracted by siblings or television. She might work best sitting at a desk, spreading her work out on the kitchen table, or lying on her bedroom floor. Being comfortable with her work environment will let her focus on her assignments. *Idea:* Consider making homework time a “quiet period” in your house. If you're reading or doing paperwork and your other children are doing their homework or playing quietly, it will be easier for your middle grader to concentrate.

3. Keep supplies nearby

A handy stash of school supplies will keep homework time moving along smoothly. Have your child fill a box or basket with everything he needs (paper, pencils, scissors, glue, ruler, graph paper, colored pencils, calculator). He might also keep poster board and other materials for projects nearby, as well as reference books like a dictionary, a thesaurus, and an atlas. Remind him to monitor supplies and arrange a time to shop with you for ones that are running low.



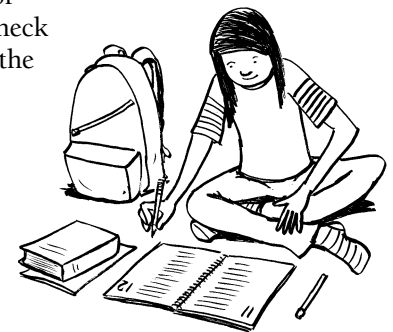
4. Stay organized

In middle school, your youngster has a lot more books and papers to keep straight, so she needs good organization skills.



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Encourage her to use her student planner to keep track of homework due dates, quizzes and tests, and meetings for group projects. She can check her planner at the end of the day and quickly spot the items she needs to bring home for each assignment. Using a different-colored folder or binder for every subject is another way to make it easy for her to find what she needs.



5. Manage assignments

Your youngster's workload might be easier to handle if he starts homework time by putting assignments in order. Some children do better knocking out the easiest assignment first and feeling like they have gotten something done. Others manage better by tackling the hardest work first, when they are most alert. Have your youngster try both ways to see which is more successful. Then, suggest that he put each assignment in his planner in the order he will do it. As he completes a task, he can mark it off—and enjoy a sense of accomplishment.

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6. Create study guides

Worksheets, textbook questions, and other assignments contain information your youngster will need to know for tests. He can stay ahead of the game by making study guides as he does his homework, instead of waiting until just before an exam to study. While working on history, he might keep a running time line that shows dates of important events like battles or presidential elections. For algebra, he could write step-by-step instructions for solving different kinds of equations. Suggest that he keep the guides in a binder or computer folder.

7. Build in breaks

Avoid homework burnout by having your middle schooler take regular breaks. For example, she might spend 45 minutes reading her novel for English class and then stop for a 10-minute break before studying for her science quiz. She'll get a chance to step away from her assignments while she walks around the block, strums her guitar, or eats a healthy snack. And clearing her head can help her feel refreshed when she sits back down to work.



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8. Plan ahead for projects

Teach your child to tackle a large project by breaking it down into individual steps. For a science fair, tasks might include coming up with an experiment, writing a hypothesis,

conducting the experiment, tabulating results, and making a display board. He can spread the steps out over several weeks in his planner or on a calendar. The project will get done on time—and it won't seem as overwhelming.

9. Be creative

Your child can add some fun to homework time by finding creative ways to complete assignments. For instance, instead of using flash



cards, she might replace the question cards in a game of Trivial Pursuit with questions from her history textbook. Then, she can play the game with you to study for her test. Or if she's allowed to approach a book report any way she wants, she could make a scrapbook based on the characters.

10. Turn it in

Homework is not complete until it's handed in! Encourage your youngster to develop a routine for getting assignments to school and turning them in on the day they're due. While he does homework, he might keep everything in his backpack except the assignment he's working on. When he finishes, and before taking out the next one, he should put the finished work in his bag. If it's big (a poster or a model that he built), he might put it right by the front door. Or he could tape a sign to the inside of the front door saying, "Take Spanish project!"

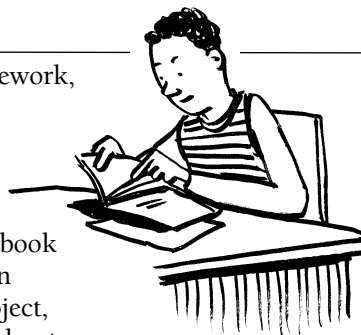
Tip: Be supportive of your child's efforts. Let him know that you expect him to do his homework and that you're proud of him for working hard and finishing.

"Help! I'm stuck!"

When your child asks you for help with homework, what should you do? Instead of finding the answer for him, suggest these ideas that may help him get "unstuck."

- **Look it up.** If he needs help in math, he can work sample problems or flip to the back of the book to see if there are extra practice problems with an answer key. When he's doing a social studies project, he might look through old worksheets to remember terms or facts.

- **Skip ahead.** Have him try the next problem or question. Sometimes, moving forward is enough to help him to remember



forgotten instructions or to find an answer that he overlooked. Then, he can go back and finish the item he skipped.

- **Get outside help.** He could call his school homework line or a friend who is strong in the subject. Also, encourage him to keep a list of helpful websites such as discoveryeducation.com/students and bjpinchbeck.com. The school or public library website might have homework resources, too.

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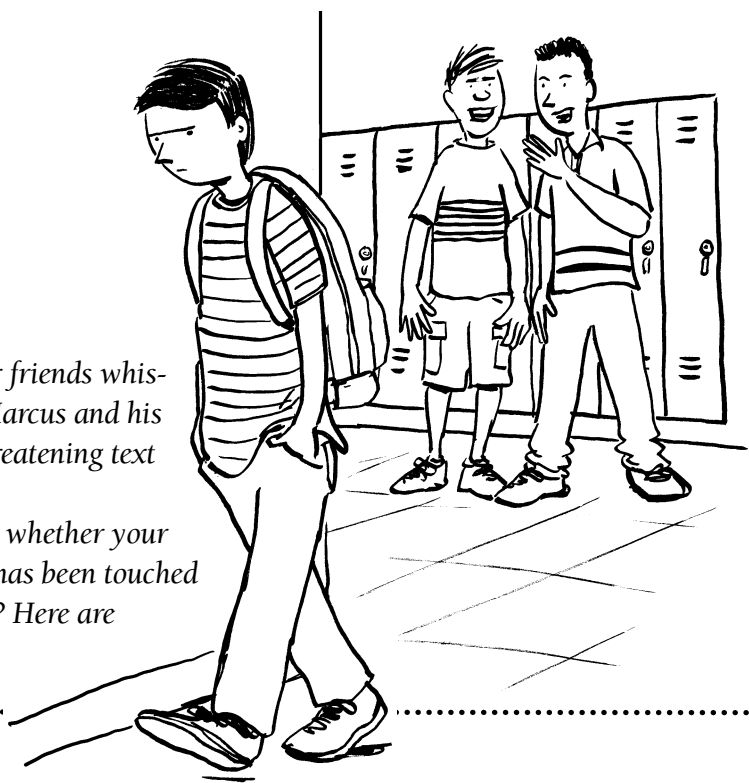
Note: If your middle grader regularly struggles with assignments, contact his teacher for advice.

Middle Years

Bullying Q&As

Lisa sits quietly at the “popular” lunch table while her friends whisper about an overweight classmate. On the school bus, Marcus and his buddies push a younger boy off his seat. Ellie receives threatening text messages from her ex-boyfriend.

These middle graders are all affected by bullying. And whether your child is a witness, a bully, or a victim, it's likely that she has been touched by the problem at some point, too. What can a parent do? Here are answers to common questions about bullying.



Q What is bullying?

A Bullying ranges from rejection (“This table isn’t for geeks”) to physical attacks like pushing and punching. It also includes spreading rumors, threats, name calling, and sexual harassment. When bullies use technology (say, by posting rumors on Facebook or sending hurtful text messages), it’s called *cyberbullying*. Usually, bullying is an ongoing problem rather than a one-time thing. Also, a bully typically has an advantage over his victim. For example, he might be more popular or physically stronger. Any form of bullying—verbal or physical—should be taken seriously.



Q I’ve been hearing a lot about bullying lately. Is it more common these days?

A Technology like text messaging and social networking has made it easier for tweens to continue harassing each other outside of school. Also, the problem is getting more attention as we learn about its serious consequences

for both bullies and victims. For instance, a child who bullies is more likely to get into trouble with the law as an adult. And being a victim can lead to increased school absences, falling grades, depression, low self-esteem, and dropping out. In some tragic cases, bullying has been tied to school violence and even suicide.

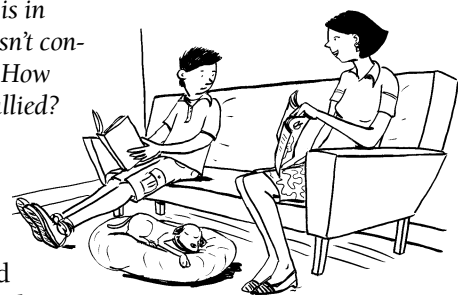
Q What motivates a bully?

A Experts used to believe that most bullies had low self-esteem and that they hurt others to feel better about themselves. While

this does happen, popular children can also be bullies. They’re motivated by social power, and they take advantage of less popular children to gain even more power. For example, a well-liked middle schooler might decide who gets invited to parties or where other kids can sit at lunch. If a classmate doesn’t do what she says, she might push or threaten the other child or call her names.

Q Now that my son is in middle school, he doesn’t confide in me very often. How will I know if he is bullied?

A It’s not unusual for children to keep bullying a secret. That’s because they’re afraid the bully will punish them for telling or because they’re ashamed of themselves for being picked on. Try bringing up the subject with your son. You might show him a newspaper or magazine article about bullying. Mention that it’s a common problem, and ask if it’s going on at his school and whether he feels safe. Also, know the risk factors—children are bullied for being overweight, having a disability, or seeming different, or because of their sexual orientation. Finally, be aware of warning signs. A victim might begin to spend more time alone, ask to stay home from school, or even experiment with dangerous behaviors (drinking alcohol, using drugs, having sex). If you suspect your youngster is being picked on, talk to the school counselor for advice.



Q What should my child do if she sees someone being bullied?

A Bullies love a crowd, so the best thing your middle grader can do is to pay attention to the victim and ignore the bully. If someone is being physically attacked, your youngster should tell the nearest adult. If a classmate is being teased, she might walk up and give the victim an excuse to escape (“Hey, we gotta go” or “Mrs. Jackson needs to see you in her office”). Keep in mind that it’s normal to be afraid to step in. It’s important for your youngster to remember that a child who is being bullied is probably scared and upset and wants help.

Q My son’s school counselor called and said he’s part of a group that’s bullying a boy in the cafeteria. We have a meeting at school this week. How should we react?

A First, get your son’s side of the story. Tell him about the phone call, and ask for an explanation. If he admits to participating in bullying, let him know that his behavior is unacceptable, and tell him what the consequence will be at home (the school will likely have its own consequence). Also, help your child become more empathetic. Talk regularly about others’ feelings (“Your sister is disappointed that she didn’t make the drill team, so let’s try to cheer her up”), and consider getting involved in community service as a family.

Q My daughter has been unhappy lately. She finally told me it’s because some of her friends have become more popular, and now they say she isn’t “cool enough” for them. Is there anything I can do?



she can seek out other friends. For instance, she might join an after-school activity (yearbook, field hockey) where she can find classmates who share her interests. In the meantime, ask a librarian to help you find books about tweens who struggle



to make friends. Knowing that other middle schoolers go through the same thing can help her feel less alone, and she might learn about strategies for building friendships.

Q My son doesn’t want to go to school because kids tease him about his learning disability. And he doesn’t want me to talk to his teachers or school counselor about it. How can I help him?

A Let your son know this isn’t something he should have to handle alone. Perhaps he’ll let you write an email to his school counselor that doesn’t name the bullies but asks for help. (“What resources do you have for children who are bullied?”) The counselor’s reply might help him feel comfortable sharing. Also, since most bullying takes place when adults aren’t looking, encourage your son to stay with a friend or a group in “hot spots” like the bus, bathroom, cafeteria, or hallways. *Tip:* Have him practice assertive body language (standing up straight, looking others in the eye). This can send the message to the bullies that he isn’t an easy target.



Q A classmate has been spreading rumors about my daughter on Facebook. What can we do?

A The first step is to help your daughter block the student from her account. Although this won’t stop the bully from posting rumors on other people’s pages, knowing that your child is ignoring her might encourage her to stop. That’s because cyberbullies enjoy the drama of posting and getting reactions. If the problem continues, you might consider contacting the bully’s parents if you feel comfortable doing so. Or the school counselor might suggest peer mediation. In the meantime, keeping an eye on your daughter’s online activities can help protect her. Try putting your computer in a common area so you can see what she’s doing. Some parents insist that their child “friend” them as a condition of joining a social networking site. Finally, remind your daughter never to share her password with anyone.

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