



HOPE Newsletter – Issue 17

5 Ways to Help Your Child Survive the Social Turmoil of Middle School

By Phyllis L. Fagell

I recently asked my middle school students to share their social concerns by writing thoughts on index cards that they dropped in a shoe box. Some were predictable — uneasiness about friends elbowing them to the side or annoyance that classmates can't keep secrets. In one less typical response, a student complained that boys were blaming inappropriate behavior on an "undeveloped prefrontal cortex."

A few wanted practical tips on how to ask for space from clingy friends, or the best way to deliver snappy comebacks when they're insulted. One wrote, "I feel judged and ignored," a statement that perfectly sums up the paradox that is middle school.

As a school counselor and mother, I know middle school students are complicated. They can be simultaneously self-conscious and exhibitionist, walled off and confessional, risk-taking and cautious. They can be intensely concerned about social justice issues, but act mean toward each other. They will project entirely different personas depending on their audience. They want their parents and teachers to back off, except for when they don't.

No one is getting out unscathed, but parents can help kids minimize social drama as they navigate middle school. Here are five strategies that will help:

Turn down the volume on drama. Some kids get an adrenaline rush from playing a central role in middle school soap operas, and it can be difficult to convince them that disengaging is the best long-term strategy. Be concrete and give examples, such as telling them not to forward risqué videos or photos that friends can post on apps such as musical.ly or Instagram. If someone sends them baiting texts, urge them to block numbers rather than respond with zingers. If they share details about friendship conflicts, help them identify and engage solely with the core players. Encourage them to be careful when interacting with people who crave chaos, or gossip friends who don't mind stirring the pot.

When kids insist on digging themselves into a deeper hole, it can be hard to wrench away the shovel. Some only learn from painful mistakes, and that has its merits too. We are hard-wired to remember negative experiences, and odds are their missteps will be seared into their memory.

Assume positive intent. Kids can be insensitive, but they generally are not intentionally cruel. All children benefit when the default assumption is goodwill. To create a culture of trust, teach children how to assess situations from multiple angles, factoring in others' point of view and state of mind. Maybe a friend didn't include them in weekend plans, but only because she wanted one-on-one time with a new classmate. Perhaps someone was left untagged in a group photo someone posted online, but the snub was unintentional. When kids perceive malice, their anger and hurt get in the way of conflict resolution. There will be times when classmates are purposely mean, but if they give each other the benefit of the doubt, everyone will be more inclined to be kind.

[Top 10 skills middle school students need to thrive, and what parents can do to help]

But know when to let go. Some friendships will run their course. As parents, it's painful to see children reeling when they are left in the dust. Adults bring their own middle school memories to the table and may struggle to stay calm and neutral. It's important to avoid over-identifying with the child's struggle. Parenting expert Annie Fox, author of "[The Girls' Q & A Book on Friendship](#)," suggests that parents explain to children that they can't control a friend's behavior or feelings, but they can get a handle on their own. Parents can review kids' options, from acting like it didn't bother them to finding new friends, and then help them evaluate their choices. Fox notes [on her blog](#), "by offering support without rushing to fix the problem, kids' thinking process will be accelerated, and hopefully they will move closer to a time when they no longer tolerate disrespectful behavior from any friend or so-called friend." Even in extreme cases, it can be difficult for kids to walk away from unhealthy relationships. Maybe their friends belittle them or pressure them to engage in behaviors that violate their values, such as skipping class or sexting. Try posing questions that encourage insight: What advice would they give to a friend in the same situation? Visual imagery also can help. For example, invite them on an imaginary hot air balloon ride. From this new vantage point, can they see the problem more clearly? Can they identify possible solutions?

Find the humor and stay optimistic. Maybe a student is the shortest boy in his grade, or the slowest runner. Maybe a girl feels like she is the last one to hit puberty, or worse, the first. Perhaps a boy is teased for having a "little kid" bedroom, or for giving long-winded answers in class, or because he has overprotective parents. The onslaught of sometimes absurd middle school challenges can make it hard to find the humor or feel optimistic, but both will boost kids' resilience.

Adults can take steps to encourage kids to keep a positive attitude. In "[UnSelfie, Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World](#)," author and educational psychologist Michele Borba suggests that kids write a daily description of actions that capture "their best self," a simple exercise that can improve optimism. Kids also can keep gratitude journals. And while bullying is no laughing matter and needs to be halted, adults can help normalize less serious predicaments and teach kids to use humor to their benefit. When children don't take themselves too seriously, they become less satisfying targets. Adults can model poking fun at their own weaknesses and imperfections, underscoring that they too are works in progress. They also can remind kids that no one should be reduced to a stereotype.

Study interactions like an anthropologist. Some middle school students are social chameleons who can read cues and adapt to any audience, but most are still working on understanding themselves, as well as others. They may incorrectly perceive negativity in a facial expression, or awkwardly join a conversation in progress. They may overshare, then feel rejected when more reserved friends don't respond in kind.

Adults can point out techniques people use to navigate different social interactions. For example, they can note that it's helpful to listen to a conversation before interjecting. They also can engage in role playing when kids are unsure how to resolve a conflict. They can explain that classmates may prefer different approaches depending on whether they are introverts or extroverts, trusting or guarded, sensitive or thick-skinned, sheltered or risk-taking.

For children to develop nuanced social skills, they need to practice being astute observers. They must engage with all types of people, including kids with special needs and those from different cultural, ethnic, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Confident, secure kids will approach everyone, including quirky loners, with kindness and a spirit of inclusivity. To foster this type of empathy, middle school students need face-to-face contact. As Borba notes, "kids use digital devices at least seven and a half hours a day, which robs them of not only connecting with their family, but also of developing crucial empathy habits."

- When I talk to groups of parents or teachers, I sometimes take them on an imaginary trip back to middle school. I always apologize first. I ask them to picture walking the hallways, passing classmates, envisioning what they wore, who they avoided and how they felt. One parent told me she couldn't participate, because she had blocked the entire awful phase from her memory. A father recalled the humiliation of being chosen last for every team in gym class. A mother remembered being the mean girl, passing notes with detailed critiques of classmates. Their memories may differ, but they share the same desire. They all hope their kids will have better luck traversing the middle school minefield than they did.

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