



FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENTS

Parent participation in education is a key factor for student success. It is important during adolescence for parents to balance student support while promoting responsibility and independence in their student.

- Become informed about your new school by attending open houses, reading school guides and student handbooks, checking parent portal and visiting the school website regularly for current information.
- Consider your child's feelings. Your 6th grader may not want you joining them for lunch, but you can stay involved by volunteering at events when requested or chaperoning fieldtrips.
- Know the name of your child's team, homeroom teacher, team leader and school counselor for his/her grade. Students benefit when family and school cooperate and have a positive relationship. If you have questions or concerns, don't hesitate to call or email the school staff.
- Ask to see your child's agenda (assignment notebook with information and communications from teachers) every evening. Ask your student to show you his/her homework, rather than asking, "Did you do your homework?"
- Provide a specific study/homework area in your home and set expectations for your child to work on homework and long-term projects. Establish rules about TV, gaming and computer/electronic usage. Organization and time management skills must be developed so students will be prepared and not feel overwhelmed.
- Know the dress code for your school and check to see that your child is wearing "school friendly" attire daily. Be more cognizant of the need of increased personal hygiene as developmental body changes occur.
- Be aware of dates for interims, report cards, early release, teacher workdays and special activities (picture day, athletic events, EOGs, etc.)
- Be sure the school has current contact information. Provide updated information to the school's Data Manager concerning changes of address, phone numbers, email or other student information.
- Talk to your child about school and peers. Listen for comments that reflect how they are feeling and what they are thinking. Expect your child to make mistakes and have personal struggles. Give them time to think and make decisions about how to handle their problems and deal with the consequences.
- Provide opportunities for your child to develop their interests and socialize with friends but be sure to monitor their choices. Peer acceptance and self-esteem issues become increasing important in middle school.

Students entering middle school are experiencing a tremendous amount of change. Just a few months ago, they had only one or two teachers. Now they may have seven or eight. Their bodies are growing and developing every day. Added to the equation are the hormones and emotions that accompany the physical changes. This all can create the perfect storm for unrest at home and at school. Although they are beginning to look like adults, middle school students still need parental and adult guidance and assistance. Here are a few tips for parents and caregivers as they navigate the middle school years.

Moving Up to Middle School

The step from elementary to middle school can be a big one, but these tips will help ease the transition for both parents and children.

by Patti Ghezzi

Your child is headed to middle school. Don't panic! You can take steps to make sure you and your child are ready.

Mark Terry, principal of Eubanks Intermediate School in Southlake, Texas, has been helping families make a seamless transition from elementary school to 6th grade for years. The secret: getting parents inside the school. "The thing we find the most successful is simply communicating with parents," he says. "They feel like their kids will get lost, and we want to assure them that they won't."

Here are Terry's tips for keeping cool while your child makes the leap to middle school:

1. Learn the dress code. New middle school students also stress out about fashion. They want the latest styles, while parents want them to dress demurely. Check with the school and find out what type of clothing is allowed. Take note of what 7th graders are wearing, shop accordingly, and try to let your child win the battle of the wardrobe.
2. Middle school students have more opportunities for extracurricular activities. Talk to your child about what interests she would like to cultivate.
3. Remind your child that she won't be the only new kid at school. Everyone in her grade will be new. "We go back to the Girl Scouts: 'Make new friends and keep the old, some are silver and the other gold,'" says Terry.
4. Familiarize yourself with how middle school operates. Does your school have team teaching? Vertical teaming? Do students have a different teacher for every academic subject? Or do some teachers teach both math and science or language arts as well as social studies? How does the school communicate with parents? Are homework and project assignments posted online?
5. If your child is less than enthusiastic about the school, check out the school spirit wear and purchase some T-shirts for the family. Wear them often. By identifying yourself as a Pirate will increase your child's sense of belonging and identifying with all the positives in this new experience. You also might meet other families at the local pizza place who also attend our school.
6. Help your child learn the invaluable lifelong skill of being organized. Many kids who struggle in middle school have problems with organization. They get overwhelmed, procrastinate, and don't ask for help until it's too late. Give your child some summer responsibilities that will help him build time-management and other organizational skills.
7. Join the PTO. Many parents think they aren't needed or wanted at the middle school, but that's not true, Terry says. He wants parents involved. His teachers want parents involved. And kids, believe it or not, want their parents involved.
8. Don't fall prey to neighborhood rumors about the middle school. Find out the facts for yourself by visiting the school and talking to the principal.
9. Enrolling your child in middle school is scary. It's a bigger school. Your child will go from being one of the oldest kids in school to being one of the youngest. The homework load will probably increase. The pace will speed up. The good news? Your child is ready. With your support, your child will rise to the challenge.

Help Your Middle Schooler Go from Survive to Thrive

Judy Willis

During the middle school years, your child's brain undergoes a growth spurt unlike any other since his first few months of life. The adolescent brain experiences a unique and powerful makeover, pruning away of all the unneeded bits of memory it has collected but not used since infancy. This house cleaning simultaneously makes room for the dynamic growth of fast, efficient memory circuits. These become the most important systems to direct thinking, reasoning, emotional self-management, decision making, problem solving, and creativity.

Adolescence is the start of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity during which the brain is most responsive to turning information into learned memory at maximum speed. The enhanced rate at which new memory forms in response to input during these years results in its dynamic reorganization. Help your children make the most of these years of their most efficient learning potential by providing opportunities to increase their motivation.

The keys to unlocking their unique adolescent brainpowers lie in motivation and opportunity. Middle school often presents new and more challenging subjects and classes. At the same time, those classes can seem irrelevant, boring, or frustrating, especially when compared to friends, social media, and technology which can seem far more interesting and readily available.

This where you, the parents, come in. You have the power to engage their interest in the topics and subjects they study in school and promote their perseverance through boredom and frustration.

Before the brain learns powerfully, it needs to care

In their early school years children are engaged in learning because the information is personally relevant. School is about the shapes and colors in their world, how to count real things, reading books they choose, the story of their own history, and the secrets held in a seed, a cell, or a cocoon.

Although they might enter middle school with that natural curiosity and desire to learn and explore, the quantity of things now required to memorize and understand can be overwhelming and disconnect them from that love of learning. But parents have the opportunity to enrich their middle schooler's education and raise their potential. You can make the difference and keep their brains caring, and therefore learning, if you use their own interests and skills, community resources, and your own experiences and associations to connect with the things they are studying at school.

Relate learning to their lives and the world around them from community to global

Get involved in their classes by either requesting upcoming topics from your child's teachers, following the sequence of their textbooks, checking class assignment webpages, or asking your middle schooler about the current topics in her classes. Try to help her connect with, understand, care about, and ultimately retain what she learns.

The goal is to link school learning with your child's interests, talents, passions, and experiences in the real world. The brain responds by increasing attentive focus to information taught at school and connecting to learning with more understanding and memory. Here's why:

1. The brain focuses attention and puts effort into knowledge building that it expects will have a pleasurable outcome. By providing opportunities for your middle schooler to use school learning in

enjoyable, relevant ways, the information taught will be “valued” by the brain for the expected positive experiences it will promote.

2. The brain stores information as patterns related to past experiences. Like a computer, your child's brain has networks and memory storage. By providing opportunities for him to link school learning to activities, experiences, and interests beyond the classroom, you'll tap into his brain's higher learning capabilities and solid long-term memory networks

From the following examples, you'll find strategies to activate interest, boost related memories, and connect school topics to things personally relevant to your middle schooler. The pay off will be her enhanced motivation and perseverance keeping alive or rekindling the childhood love of learning so evident when starting school.

Activating interest and boosting memory circuits

- What does your child love to do, know, see, hear, or discover? Build on these high motivators, from comic books to video games, by looking for ways they can connect to school subjects. These are what will become motivators for his perseverance when coursework is especially boring, challenging, or frustrating.

- Connecting your child to a topic at school before or soon after it begins will prime his interest and memory. For example, before the unit about the Civil War, watch films together such as *Glory*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Lincoln*, or *Cold Mountain* to mentally animate a potentially “dry” topic about “old stuff” through events and people coming to life in the movies or books. If your child enjoys reading, there are equally wonderful books of historical fiction to connect them to all of the periods of history she will study in middle school. - - Check out: [Common Sense Media](#) or [Good Reads](#).

- Personalize connections to school topics by telling your child how you (or your friends or relatives whom they know) use math or science in hobbies and jobs. Or what you or other adults they know lived through the relevant time in history, or lived in the country they are studying.

By exposing your children to a variety of people and experiences, you will stimulate their curiosity to go beyond the classroom. They will see the value of academic effort and the opportunities available connecting through the doors of learning.

Have friends over who use the knowledge your child is learning in their everyday lives, careers, or hobbies. For example consider their use of math skills for robotics, foreign language skills for travel to other countries or creative artistic talents. Invite these friends to join you and your middle schooler on museum trips or technology expos. Visit them at their places of work.

- Local news can springboard interest in history, finances, ethics, and development of personal values. If you see in the local paper that the city council voted against funding a skateboard park, ask your skateboarding child how he feels about that decision. Use questions that connect his interest in (or frustration about) the decision to school topics and as bridges to related subject matter or to developing social and ethical values.

- Did the city council follow the system of government set up by the constitution?

- Who should decide where tax money goes?

- How does this situation resemble taxation without representation in the Colonies before the Revolutionary War?

- Since kids your age pay local taxes when they pay sales tax, should they therefore have a say (or vote) in local spending of that money for things like the skateboard park? If so, how could it be worked out and presented to the city council?

Opportunities to use and enjoy the things taught at school - from home projects to on-the-go math

When you know the topic your middle schooler is studying, ask yourself, "What is something she loves that might connect to the knowledge or skills she is acquiring?" It might be a subtle connection, but if you find a way to link to something she likes physically, musically, socially, or recreationally you are hooking into her brain's own most powerful motivational "reward" system.

- For example, algebra, geography, and biology can become topics adolescents will want to learn if you work with them to do something they really relate to, like designing a model land-water amphibious vehicle.

- Find appropriate YouTube videos of stand up comedians telling jokes in the foreign language your child is learning. He'll bump up his motivation to learn the vocabulary (as well as listening to the pronunciation) because the more he learns of the language, the more of the humor he'll understand. Have a few of these videos that he can return to periodically and experience the brain's reward system as it is activated by awareness of the progress he is making by understanding more and more of the jokes.

- Math calculations become meaningful, even for adolescents, in trips to the store where items they want to purchase are possible—if they are up to your challenges of mental math. Most large supermarkets list the price per ounce on the shelf below the item price.

- When your middle schooler wants *that* box of cereal, blocking the information on the shelf and asking her to figure how many ounces can be purchased for \$1.00. (It becomes not only a math review, but also an eye-opener about the price of boxed cereal.) She can also practice percentages when she calculates the savings on something she wants that is on sale for 25% off.

What you'll ignite

It is so critical for children in middle school to retain or reboot their sense of wonder and experience learning as something they want for themselves. When you ignite their interests to align with what they are learning and provide opportunities to make that learning relevant, you achieve that end. You will help them develop positive engagement with school and grow to teens and then adults who thrive from their natural enthusiasm, curiosity, wealth of knowledge, and confidence. You will spur them to investigate, interact with, and improve the world around them. And you'll be helping them not just survive, but thrive during the challenges of middle school.

This piece is part of a week-long series with tips for how parents can help their kids survive middle school. More to come every day this week!

Follow the Parent Toolkit on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).

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Dr. Judy Willis combined her 15 years as a board-certified practicing neurologist with ten subsequent years as a classroom teacher to become a leading authority in the neuroscience of learning.

Supporting Social & Emotional Development in Middle Schoolers

Fostering social and emotional development in your middle schooler is incredibly important. Read some expert tips on how to help your child.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is knowing your emotions, strengths and challenges, and how your emotions affect your behavior and decisions.

Try to talk with your child about their feelings regularly.

It may be hard at this age to engage your child in a long discussion about emotions, but taking a couple of minutes a day to ask, "What made you feel good today?" or "Did anything upset you today?" is a great way to show you care.

Be careful not to tell your child how they feel.

For example, you may want to say, "It looks like you are feeling conflicted about going to that party, because you are not acting as excited as you usually do," or "You say you are not nervous about the test, but you are active very fidgety when you are trying to sit down and study" instead of "I can't believe you aren't nervous about that test."

Share personal stories to build your child's self-awareness.

You can say, "I just want to let you know that I'm here for you, and I've gone through similar experiences when I was in middle school, so I understand what you are going through. If you ever need to talk about anything, I will be here."

Self-Management

Self-management is controlling emotions and the behaviors they spark in order to overcome challenges and pursue goals.

Remind your middle-schooler that there are consequences to their actions.

When your child has calmed down from an outburst, you may want to say, "Slamming doors, yelling, or acting out against family members or friends is not proper behavior. When you yell, you're scaring your little brother, and when you talk back to me, it hurts my feelings. Can you please talk to me and tell me what's bothering you?"

Set clear expectations and boundaries for your child and stick to them.

When enforcing a rule about homework, you can say, "I would like it if you could try to finish your homework before you play any video games, talk on the phone or text with friends. These are the rules, and if you don't follow them, there will be consequences and you will lose some privileges. What do you think about this?"

Social Awareness

Social awareness is understanding and respecting the perspectives of others, and applying this knowledge to social interactions with people from diverse backgrounds.

Nurture your teen's empathy.

If your middle-schooler is nervous about making friends, you can say, "I remember when I went to middle school, my best friend from elementary school started hanging out with new friends, and I felt left out. Don't worry, many of your classmates are going through the same challenges. Why don't you try talking to someone new, or join a club to meet new friends?"

You can talk to your teen about the importance of kindness by saying,

"Have you ever heard about karma? You get good karma by doing good things for others and treating them how you would like to be treated. Have you done something kind and helpful for others lately? How did that make you feel?"

Relationships

The ability to interact meaningfully with others and to maintain healthy relationships with diverse individuals and groups contributes to overall success.

Talk to your teen regularly about their friends by asking questions like,

"Have you made any new friends in school? I know it may be hard to transition to a new school, but there are a lot more people you can be friends with. Why don't you try to talk to that new exchange student in your class?"

Teach your teen about first impressions.

"How do you see yourself?", "How do you think others see you?" and "How do you want others to see you?"

How to talk about bullying:

Work together with your child on what they can say to stop the harassment and allow them to remain respectful of themselves and others. Sometimes, it's as simple as saying, "Stop, you know you're wrong," with some assertion. Or they can say "You know you are out of line," if the bully is harassing another person, and then your child can leave the area and tell an adult who can help the victim.

To help resolve conflicts between you and your teen as peacefully as possible, you try saying,

"I know you want to spend more time with your friends, but you haven't been meeting your responsibilities at home. If you do your chores this week, I will let you extend your curfew by 30 minutes so you can hang out with your friends more. How does that sound?"

Responsible Decision-Making

Responsible decision-making is the ability to make choices that are good for you and for others. It is also taking into account your wishes and the wishes of others.

Talk through problems, logical consequences, and resolutions with your child.

For example, if your child is falling behind on their homework, you can say, "Why don't you set aside time after dinner to continue working instead of hanging out at your friend Jenny's house tonight?"

Support your middle-schooler even when they make decisions you don't agree with.

For example, instead of saying, "I told you it was a bad idea to skip studying for that test," say "Do you think you'll skip studying next time? What would have been a better choice?"

Social & Emotional Development

Research shows that those with higher social-emotional skills have better attention skills and fewer learning problems, and are generally more successful in academic and workplace settings. Like any math or English skills, these skills can be taught and grow over time.

<https://www.parenttoolkit.com/social-and-emotional-development/conversation-starter/self-awareness/supporting-social-and-emotional-development-in-middle-schoolers>

Building Family Identity

By Jim Burns

My wife, Cathy, and I stared at each other in disbelief as our oldest daughter, Christy, told us she was running away. When she started packing her suitcase, we knew she was serious. Cathy and I weren't sure if we should laugh or cry. After all, Christy was only 6.

Our daughter told us she was moving to Julia's house across the street because her mommy and daddy were nicer. My wife called Julia's mother to tell her what was taking place and that Christy was on her way over. Then, we stood on our sidewalk and watched our little girl carry her suitcase and favorite doll across the street where Julia's mother waited outside the door to greet her.

A few hours later, Julia's mom reminded Christy it was Monday night, when our family always went to Golden Spoon for frozen yogurt after dinner. It was a tradition our three girls always looked forward to. To our delight, she called and asked if she could go. It was a joyous reunion!

The weekly yogurt run was part of our family identity — part of what made us who we were. Our three daughters are now grown, but when our family gets together, we still make trips to Golden Spoon. It's one of those simple traditions that have kept our family bonds strong.

Not surprisingly, a strong family identity helps children develop a strong and healthy self-identity. Knowing what makes their family unique — traditions, values, ways of relating to one another — gives children a clear starting point for discovering their own place in the world. Studies even show that kids who report a strong connection to family tend to be less promiscuous and face less risk of drug and alcohol abuse.

It's been a long time since Christy "ran away." With Christy, the journey was never dull, and we had a few bumps in the road along the way, but today she is a teacher and a responsible young woman deeply tied to our family values, faith and identity.

Parents who want to equip their kids to thrive can start by building a strong family identity. There are at least three important building blocks: shared time, shared traditions and shared values. Let's take a closer look at each one.

Shared Time

Why it matters:

Your children regard your presence as a sign of caring and connectedness. Don't underestimate the positive message you are giving your kids by watching their games, driving them around town and being with them in hundreds of other ways. Your presence gives them a greater sense of security than almost anything else you can offer them. When kids understand that their parents are there for them, they can overcome amazing obstacles to make a positive impact in their world.

Perhaps one of the biggest problems of modern culture is this breathless pace in which we live our lives. Well-meaning families have become overcommitted and underconnected. But families who build a healthy identity are the ones who slow down enough to share enjoyable and meaningful times together. Fifty-two weeks a year of throwing a ball together, taking walks, sharing milkshakes and just being together multiplied over 18 years is a lot of connection time. Those shared times are a deposit into a child's emotional and spiritual bank account that will pay off in dividends of family intimacy and understanding.

Family solutions:

A little creativity can lead to meaningful family times. The Kneipp family, of Washington state, enjoys indoor campouts — complete with camp games, camp food, a no-electricity rule, a fire in the fireplace, s'mores and sleeping bags in the living room. The Nyberg family, of Wisconsin, enjoys "Popcorn Nights." As they snack, the topic of conversation is always "I love you because ... " They appreciate how this together time helps them focus on what's special about each family member.

Meaningful times don't have to be planned, either. The Teetzel family, of Ontario, has learned to make the most of everyday moments. They connect with good-morning snuggles, tickle wars, science experiments while making supper, silly faces in the mirror, butterfly kisses and prayers before bed.

One-on-one time can be just as important as time together with the entire family. The Tuckers, of North Carolina, routinely schedule mother-daughter and father-son outings. Whether the time is spent shopping at a thrift store or catching the latest outdoor concert, the main focus is being together and growing closer. The Gretz family, of Maryland, carves out special time for their four kids every day. Each child enjoys 20 minutes of

uninterrupted time with a parent. Sometimes the children want to play with dolls or LEGOs; other times, they just want to talk about their day.

Shared Traditions

Why it matters:

Families who make a place for traditions in their routine and rhythm place another great building block within the family identity. Family traditions are a bit like the old chair we have in our living room. It's become more than a comfortable chair; it's a part of our family identity. Family traditions build family memories. They're talked about, reviewed and become a part of the family story. Traditions nurture the sense of belonging that makes up an identity in families.

Some traditions just happen, but you can also be proactive with building new ones. How about making a list of traditions that could help draw your family together as well as reinforce your values? Your list might include holiday traditions or service projects or maybe weekly family nights where you build warm memories around play and laughter. It's never too late to start new traditions. Some last a lifetime, and others just for a season.

Family solutions:

In many families, traditions often center on food and meals. The unique tradition of the "New Plate" is used in the Needles household. Before a meal, the "New Plate" (a cherished piece of family china) is presented to a child who has done something special — such as helping out without being asked. The Osbornes, of Missouri, have started a weekly tradition they call "Sweet Sundays." The family members look through cookbooks together to decide what they are going to make. After church, the family whips up the dessert together and anxiously waits for the treat after dinner.

Birthdays are also fertile ground for meaningful traditions. The Savage family, of Illinois, celebrates with a birthday breakfast. The night before a child's birthday, Mom and Dad wait until the child has fallen asleep, then sneak into the bedroom and hang streamers and balloons. In the morning, the child wakes to a decorated room, birthday plates on the kitchen table, and cake and ice cream for breakfast. The Maynard family, of Oregon, has been observing "half-birthdays" for three generations. The family celebrates the special day with half a cupcake and a half-used candle.

The Tomcik family, of Ohio, works together on an annual family memory journal. Throughout the year, they save small mementos and photos from different family events.

Each family member takes pride in creating a page or two, and at the end of the year, all the pages are put together in one scrapbook.

Shared Values

Why it matters:

The building block of shared values may be the most important and the most complicated of family identity issues. While several studies have shown that many young people leave the church after high school, I'm convinced that kids who frequently experience faith conversations in the home are much more likely to adhere to their family's values later in life. These conversations help form a strong family identity that is rooted in their faith and values.

About every six months, Cathy and I would pull out a notebook and write each of our daughters' names. Then we'd discuss what we hoped we could teach our girls in the next six months on topics such as faith, sexual purity, relationships and character.

Such topics don't always come naturally for parents. Maybe you have some anxiety about starting a faith or values conversation with your children. Remember, your talk doesn't have to be forced or lengthy; it can be simple, short and spontaneous. Getting preachy with your kids can be just as unhelpful as avoiding the topic of faith. Let the discussion be as natural as possible.

Family solutions:

Rather than lecturing kids, encouraging lively family discussions can be an effective way to share values. The Needles family, of North Carolina, presents thought-provoking questions as dinner conversation starters. They encourage family members to share thoughts and experiences, and they try to relate the questions to their daily Scripture readings.

For faith and values to be truly caught by kids, parents must model those values in their daily lives. The Branyon family, of Texas, has established their own "huddle time" before heading out to special events. Briefly gathering together to pray reminds them that they are a team and that God is always with them. As a way to pass along the value of helping others, the Haines family, of South Carolina, started a children's "clothes closet" in their basement. They collected donations of gently used children's clothes of all sizes, then prepared boxes of clothing for families in need. The effort made such an impact on the Haines' 5-year-old son that he began donating his own toys and clothes to other children, without any prompting from his parents.

Connect with your Child: Prevent Bullying and Peer Abuse

How can you connect with you children so that you understand what their school days are like and whether or not they are experiencing bullying or peer abuse?

Communication is essential

Begin by asking the right questions. Rather than asking, “How was your day” which usually leads to: “fine”, consider asking questions that encourage a longer conversation. You do not need to ask specific questions about relationships or problems, as indirect questions might trigger a discussion about the things you really want to know.

Suggestions for younger children include:

- What did you do at recess today?
- What is the coolest thing you learned?
- Did anyone have anything that looked really great in his lunch?
- If your desks weren't assigned, is there anyone you would/would not want to sit next to?

Suggestions for middle school children include:

- What was the best thing that happened today?
- If someone in one of your classes had to be the teacher tomorrow, who would you pick?
- Does anyone in your class seem to be having a hard time?
- Did anyone push your buttons today?
- What is your favorite class?

Suggestions for high school children include:

- What is your most challenging class and why?
- Did you do anything helpful for someone today?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your day? Why?
- How is the food in the cafeteria? Anything you wish they would add to the menu?
- Do you have time to catch up with friends during the day?
- Are there any new clothing trends this year?

Knowing the right time and location:

For young children, after school snack or dinnertime offers a chance for meaningful communication and gives children an opportunity to share while

they are also focused on eating. As they get older, car rides offer a great opportunity for talking with your child, as teens feel less threatened having personal conversations when their parents are not looking directly at them. High school students communicate primarily via text to their friends. Connect with them by texting as well and you will gain an entry into their world. Use your texts as a starting point for future in person conversations.

Learn how to listen.

Reflective or empathic listening is often the best way to show your child that you were really listening. Instead of rushing to “solve the problem”, build their trust by letting them release their emotions. You can confirm you understood what they said by responding:

- “What I hear you saying is”...(and repeat back their words as best you can. Or,
- “If, I’m getting this right, you’re saying”...(again, repeat what they said.)

After you have repeated their words, ask them if you understood correctly. Next, practice empathy and *validate their feelings* by letting them know that you want to support them in whatever problems they are facing. You might say:

- “When I put myself in your shoes, I can understand how that would make you feel.” Or,
- “That must have really made you feel badly.” And, finally,
- “I see what you mean, and I will do everything I can to protect you.”

Respond calmly and carefully

- If your child discloses that they are being bullied, make sure they understand that it is NOT their fault. Reassure them that they did the right thing by telling you. Help them find ways to handle it by confirming the circumstances¹:
 - Has your child experienced problems with those involved before?
 - Did those involved have power over your child either in strength, popularity or perception?
 - Did other children observe the conflict or did it happen in private

Once you understand the facts, tell the teacher or principal who can monitor the situation and prevent further incidents.

- Continue to make yourself available to listen to your children every day.

¹ www.stopbullying.gov



Helping Your Child to be Successful at School

Your school age children often spend more time with their teachers than they do with you. It is important that you, your children, and their teachers have a good working relationship. A good relationship will help your child do better in school as well as reduce stress in your life.

Here are some ideas for building a relationship of trust with your children's teachers:

- Be aware of difficulties. If you learn about a problem, investigate as soon as possible. Listen to both sides. (Many parents believe that the teacher is always right, and many parents believe that the child is always right.) Keep an open mind.
- Talk to your child about daily events at school.
- Be involved in homework. Find out if your child's teacher regularly assigns homework.
- Make sure your child has a quiet place to work. After dinner, the kitchen table can be a good place to study.
- Establish a routine at home. Set up regular times to do homework, play, and go to bed.

If your child brings home a disappointing report card:

- Sit down with your child and look over the report card.
- Praise your child. Find at least one good thing on the report card: attendance, no tardies.
- Be calm! Let your child tell you about his or her poor grades.
- Ask how you can help your child do better.
- Ask what your child can do to make better grades.
- Make a plan with your child's teacher and your child to do better.

Two Questions Your Middle Schooler Has About Puberty and Love (and How to Answer Them)

Melisa Holmes

As *children* enter middle school and instantly morph into *adolescents*, there are two developmental tasks looming large for them. First, they need to deal with puberty and feel some sense of "being normal." Then, once they accept that they are not a freak of nature, their next task is to be seen (*by their peers*) as "lovable." That's when we, as parents, tend to collectively wince.

These two developmental tasks are the driving force behind your middle schooler's conflicting desires to blend in (by being "normal") but to stand out, look good, be cool, and make it all look effortless (in a big effort to be seen as lovable). And in Mother Nature's usual extraordinary way, she added in some brain reconstruction at the same time to make the whole adolescent project a bit more dramatic and...sexy (literally).

So as you send your tweens or young teens off to middle school, recognize that they are searching for affirmative answers to two important questions: "Am I Normal?" and "Am I Lovable?" The challenge is that they won't accept the answers from you, but your unwavering love and private hugs provide the crucial foundation upon which the rest of their lovability will grow. Though you can't answer the questions, you can *guide them* toward the truth they need by normalizing what's normal, acknowledging without encouraging relationships, and having the tough talks that will set the foundation for healthy sexual development.

Step 1

Normalize Normal

Sixth grade generally begins with girls towering over the boys in height and hormonal influence. But, never fear. Boys' growth starts later, but lasts longer, ultimately making them taller than most girls. Similarly, boys will begin to wallow in their own hormonal stew and experience just as much *emotional stretching* (new and bigger emotions) as girls.

As parents, the best things we can do for our children as their bodies and emotions grow, are to normalize normal, and stay calm. All 12-year-olds worry about how their bodies are changing and need reassurance that they are indeed normal and will indeed grow an adult body (or stop growing if that's the worry). If we act worried, too, then they will freak out. Make sure your child understands what to expect next as puberty progresses. Don't wait until a change has already occurred to explain it. And by all means, help kids recognize that normal bodies are not what they're seeing on billboards or in magazines.

If you truly have concerns about your child's physical development, or if your child has concerns that you can't address confidently and calmly, then take them to their doctor so they can get answers they desperately need (even if it's a simple, "Congratulations, you're normal.")

Step 2

Acknowledge but Don't Encourage Their "Relationships"

As puberty progresses and higher-than-ever levels of hormones wash over adolescent brains, it's normal for them to experience those new feelings that change the way they look at each other. As much as we parents may want to wish it away, sexual desire is living large in middle school.

In these early stages, it takes on many forms with "desire" far outweighing "sexual" for most. Initially these new feelings may appear as increased attention to clothes and appearances or a new awkwardness in front of crushes. Increasingly, there will be blatant flirtation, both IRL (in real life) and digitally. And if your child finds a mutual attraction, they may be "going out" before you know it.

For young teens, "going out" comes after "talking" (which is usually texting), and they don't really "go" anywhere. Although their developmental goal is to be peer-confirmed "lovable," true love is not required. Instead, simply being labeled as someone's boyfriend or girlfriend is confirmatory enough. And at this age, they are much more interested in the label than in the actual relationship. In fact, most middle school "relationships" only last a couple weeks to a few months. That's just enough time to show their world they are indeed lovable.

As a parent, you will serve your child best by acknowledging their status as BF/GF with a well meaning, "That's nice." You will also help them by NOT pushing a deeper relationship, encouraging more time together, or arranging to send them on "dates." Early sexualization is already rampant in our culture, and we don't need middle school parents adding more pressure. Slow and awkward is good for now because fast and furious is just around the corner.

For many other middle schoolers, romance is not the required route to accepting themselves as lovable. A firm foundation in self worth goes a long way toward eliminating a desperate need for being someone's girlfriend or boyfriend, now often referred to as "boo" and/or "bae." For both boys and girls, being lovable can also be achieved through friendships and feeling valued and respected among peers. So don't feel like your child MUST be someone's bae to check off this developmental task.

Step 3

Promote Prevention through HOW

One of the greatest gifts of middle school is that it provides a developmental space in which kids are capable of understanding complex issues, they are making big plans for their future, AND they still listen to their parents (while pretending they're not). That means it's a critical time for prevention messages.

Thanks to our digital world, middle schoolers are exposed to information and opinions about topics traditionally saved for older adolescents. Whether they hear it from you or not, they definitely know something about sex by 6th grade. And by the end of middle school, they've been exposed to conversations or behaviors related to sexual orientation, gender identity, drugs, alcohol, STDs, condoms, teen pregnancy, rape, pornography and pretty much every other topic you may try to avoid.

Most teens actually want their parents to talk with them about sex, love and relationships, but when parents aren't addressing the topics they are curious about, teens turn to their peers and the Internet where misinformation abounds.

The best way to help children is to talk openly and honestly about sexuality and relationships – the good and bad of both. Admit that sexual attraction is exciting, but that early sexual activity can definitely be risky. But in addition to the information you provide, encourage them to set their own boundaries within the context of her goals and values, and then challenge them to figure out HOW they can stick to their plan. HOW will they communicate their boundaries? What can they say?

This type of rehearsing is a highly effective prevention strategy for all adolescents. If they have time to think about and practice responses before they are faced with a challenging situation, they are more likely to respond in a way that is in line with their values. HOW will you know you have consent? HOW will you say no? HOW will you remove yourself from the situation?

As usual, they don't need you to answer their tough questions, but they do want to discuss them with you. Challenging them to make a plan and figure out HOW they will stick to it is a crucial skill that will serve them well throughout their adolescent journey. And when the speed picks up and the awkwardness starts to fade, they will know how to steer in the direction that's right for them.

Melisa Holmes

MD, Co-Founder of Girlology & Guyology

How To Talk To Children About Suicide: An Age-By-Age Guide

It seems inevitable that children will hear the word suicide. While parents may feel wary about talking about mental health and suicide with their children, experts say it's important. Death by suicide has increased every year since 1999 in people age 10 to 74. Talking about it makes a huge difference.

"It can go a long way to feel supported by other people," Thea Gallagher, clinic director at the Center for Treatment and Study of Anxiety in the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, told TODAY.

What's more, discussing suicide doesn't encourage it.

"You can't prompt suicide by talking about it or asking about it," Gallagher said.

How parents address suicide with their children varies by age. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychiatric Association recommend that parents do not talk about tragedies until children are 8 years old.

"If this isn't going to touch your kids, you don't need to address it," Dr. Deborah Gilboa, a parenting expert, told TODAY. "If you think they are going to hear about it — even with the youngest kids — then you should talk about it."

Parents shouldn't avoid this conversation just because it is tough.

"It is incredibly important because of the stigma around mental health; it is a reason people give for not getting help," she said.

Talking about suicide with children is important for three reasons, said Gilboa.

1. Children deserve the truth: Lying or hiding the truth from children often backfires. What's more, it can ruin the relationship between child and parent.
2. Mental health is genetic: Mental illness runs in family and affects almost every family. Sharing accurate information about mental health and suicide gives children information accurate information about it.
3. Even if it doesn't happen in your family, hearing about it provides parents a good starting point for having a candid talk about suicide and its impact on others.

Preschool-Kindergarten: Stick to the basics.

If a young child asks about suicide, Gilboa recommends keeping it simple.

"You could say 'This person died and it is really sad,'" she said. "'They had a bad disease and it just took over.' Just exactly like you would talk to your kids if someone had cancer."

Gallagher agrees that giving children basics works best.

“Follow the lead of the child,” she said. “Gauge where they are developmentally and cognitively.”

Ages 7 to 10: Give short, true answers.

From 7 to 10, it's still important for parents to emphasize the death is sad and that the person died from a disease.

“With any scary topic we are going to give short true answers and see if the child asks follow-up questions,” Gilboa said.

Parents could say something like: “Uncle Tom had an illness called depression for many years. He died from his illness, but I wish he had been able to get more help.”

But Gilboa says it is preferable that children guide the conversation with their questions. That way parents don't provide too much information children might not want.

“Then you are not overwhelming them,” she said

Ages 11-14: Be more concrete.

“You have to be more concrete,” Gilboa said. “We must be talking to our pre-teens about the warning signs of suicidality.”

By middle school, one in three children have experienced mood dysregulation that scares them, Gilboa said. This doesn't mean that pre-teens will go on to experience a mental health condition. But it does show that at a young age, children are grappling with complicated emotions.

Start the conversation with questions.

“The best entry way is to ask them what they heard. ‘What have you heard about this person? What have you heard about suicide? What are your beliefs?’” Gilboa explained.

Gathering information allows parents to be on the same page as their children. Most people tune out conversations that are too basic for them and providing too much information could be too stressful.

“Enter the conversation where they are,” she said.

This also gives parents the chance to correct any misinformation their children might have heard. If your pre-teen says, 'Weak people die by suicide,' then a parent can explain that the person died because of an illness, not weakness.

“Someone dying of a heart attack isn't the person's fault. The disease was stronger than the treatment,” Gilboa said. “People who have depression sometimes die.”

Parents should ask their children if they have thought about suicide or if any of their friends have.

“Ask clear questions and don’t dance around it so they know it is a safe place,” she said.

High school: Not if. When.

Parents of high school students can have the exact same conversation with their teens as they would with middle schoolers with one notable difference. Instead of asking *if* their teens or their friends have experienced mental health conditions or thought of suicide ask *when*.

“We are not going to say ‘if.’ Not ‘What would you do *if* you were worried about this.’ But, ‘What will you do *when* you are worried about yourself or your friends?’” Gilboa said. “It is nearly impossible for a child to get through high school without knowing someone with a mental health condition.”

Gilboa recommends that parents address this with teens as if they would talk about suicide with another adult because teens want to be addressed like an adult.

It’s also important that parents reassure teens that having a mental health condition is perfectly normal and they should ask for help.

Gilboa suggested saying: “I am not going to consider it a fail if you have mental health problems.”

College: Check-in.

Parents should touch base with young adults, too, especially if they experienced suicidal ideation or know someone who has died by apparent suicide.

“This can be a trigger,” Gilboa said.

If they respond that they are fine, Gilboa urges parents to press them.

“I would suggest they would reach back one more time: ‘I am glad to hear that. That answer is you supporting me. Is there anything I can do to support you?’” she said. “Call it out in the nicest way possible.”