

## Parents Ask: How can we help our child cope with middle school meanness?

Bullying occurs far more often than many parents realize. "Between 15-25 percent of U.S. students are bullied with some frequency while 15-20 percent report that they bully others with some frequency," according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Bullying can be particularly damaging during the middle school years, partly because their insecurities make adolescents more vulnerable to putdowns, and partly because adolescents react to their own insecurities about being accepted by attacking others. Trends established in middle school often continue in high school.

As they move from the safety of a self-contained classroom managed by a surrogate parent into a challenging new venue where respect must be earned anew from many more teachers and students, children often mask their own insecurities by targeting others. These young bullies believe that victimizing others reduces the likelihood that they will be targeted themselves. Because their heightened sensitivity makes gifted children especially vulnerable to taunts by abusive peers, their parents need to prepare them to deal with middle school meanness. Here's how.

**Encourage your child to make healthy friends.** Even without bullying, the transition to middle school requires each student to prove her competence and worth to dozens of other critical and often self-absorbed adolescents. Implicit in each social encounter are the questions: What's special about you? Why should I bother to get to know or respect you? How will being your friend help me?

Teens under this type of scrutiny need regular parental support to make friends and develop self-confidence. Gifted children may need guidance even more so because of their heightened sensitive and tendency to go it alone. Discuss how specific children behave. Help your child identify those who that don't engage in putdowns might share her values and interests. Then encourage her to cultivate friendships by seeking them out for conversations or after-school activities. Brainstorm about other ways she can spend time with them.

If your daughter seems to cycle through relationships with dizzying speed, she may be associating with girls who brutalize each other through gossip and ostracizing behaviors. If your son's friends use humorous putdowns with each other, they are dangerously close to hurting someone through jokes that just aren't funny. Friends like these your child doesn't need.

Bystanders who remain silent empower a bully. Those who speak up empower the victim.
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**Explain the three roles students play: bully, victim or witness.** Whenever bullying occurs, every student present plays one of these roles. The witness role is pivotal. Even though witnesses may not actively participate in the bullying or laugh at the putdowns, simply keeping quiet contributes to the abuse. Witnesses who remain silent form an approving audience that empowers a bully, just as witnesses who stand up as advocates empower the victim and challenge a bully's power to intimidate and hurt. Standing up, of course, requires personal courage and preparation. It is also character-building.

**Discuss practical ways that your child can stand up** when someone is being bullied, identify

other concerned children, and encourage him to talk to them about what they can unite to minimize the destructiveness of bullying.

**Prepare your child for situations when she may be victimized.** Identify situations where bullying is likely to occur, brainstorm about possible situations and identify an appropriate sequence of responses, including direct flight to safety if all else fails. Role-play various scenarios until your child is confident about handling them.

**Make sure your child is armed with verbal comebacks to say to a bully--***Hey, knock it off. It's not true and it's not funny--and to a victim--Don't listen to what she said. We all know what she's doing.* They should be dismissive, but not nasty. Nasty will escalate the situation.

**Help your child identify an adult at school he can trust to respond responsibly.** Encourage him to confide in this adult if patterns of repeated bullying by specific students or bullying in specific unsupervised locations emerge.

Encourage your child to identify other concerned children and discuss how they can work together to prevent bullying.

**Make sure your child is not doing anything to invite hurtful putdowns or bullying.** Gifted students tend to use their verbal wit to ward off others and in the process may contribute to the climate of trash-talking and negative jokes that spawn the more brutal aspects of bullying. In addition, the know-it-all attitude that gifted children often display comes across as arrogant, and this makes an utterly inviting target.

**Help your child develop appropriate social skills.** Because they tend to turn to adults for approval rather than to peers, gifted students sometimes fail to develop the social skills which would help them fit in with peers. You may need to spell out the importance of having healthy peer relationships. Give your child every opportunity to develop these skills when she is younger. Take advantage of opportunities which present themselves to coach for improvement or reinforce appropriate behaviors.

Unfortunately, some parents of gifted children lack important social skills themselves and do not recognize similar deficits in their own children. Consider asking teachers and other adults who know your child well to give you honest feedback and advice about your child's level of social maturity.

**Affirm your child by expressing your love, showing affection, and stressing your confidence** that he can handle difficult situations with dignity and will ultimately prevail.

**Intervene yourself if your child has exhausted all the options you have identified,** the situation appears to be growing dangerous, or adults have not responded responsibly. If you prefer anonymity, call the confidential Safe Schools Hotline, 314-889-SAFE.

**Encourage school authorities to explore bully prevention programs offer by CHARACTERplus** if the school is not doing so already. These programs have demonstrably reduced antisocial behavior and actually boost academic achievement for 300,000 students in 600 schools in Missouri and Illinois. ([www.characterplus.org](http://www.characterplus.org))

**Take advantage of programs like GRC's enrichment curriculum with its emphasis on developing interpersonal skills.** GRC has long recognized that gifted children need much more than enriched academic curriculum. Consequently, GRC teachers focus on their psychosocial

development as well as their academic prowess. GRC makes helping gifted children acquire social skills--especially cooperation with others--and develop healthy self esteem based on their character, not their talents, its top priority.

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This article is adapted from one that first appeared in mindwonders, the newsletter of Gifted Resource Council (GRC) in St. Louis, MO. For information about GRC and additional resources, visit [www.giftedresourcecouncil.org](http://www.giftedresourcecouncil.org).