

## **How Can I Help My Child Cope With All The Meanness And Bullying In Middle-School?** **by Dennis O'Brien**

Middle school tends to be a brutal experience for children, and the heightened sensitivity of gifted children to their own feelings and those of others, makes them especially vulnerable to being tormented by abusive peers.

Bullying is most damaging during the middle school years, partly because their insecurities make adolescents especially vulnerable to putdowns, and partly because adolescents react to their own insecurities about being accepted by attacking others.

As they move from the safety of a self-contained classroom managed by a surrogate parent into a 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 quickly learn that victimizing someone else reduces the likelihood that they will be targets themselves. Fortunately, there are things parents can do that help a child survive this foreboding ordeal.

» 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 which empowers a bully, just as witnesses who stand up as advocates empower the victim and challenge a bully's power to intimidate and hurt. This, of course, requires personal courage and preparation, but it is also character-building.

» Discuss ways that your child can stand up when someone else is being bullied, identify other concerned children, and encourage your child to talk to them about what they can unite to do.

» Make sure your child is armed with some lines to say to the bully—*Hey, knock it off. It's not true and it's not funny*—and to the victim—*Don't listen to what she said. We all know she's just being mean.*

» Prepare your child for situations when he or 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.

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

» 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 give rise to the more brutal aspects of bullying. In addition, they often display a know-it-all attitude that 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. The importance of having healthy peer relationships may need to be spelled out for them. Parents should give their children every opportunity to develop these skills when their children are 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 the 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.

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

Any teenager under this type of scrutiny needs regular parental support to make friends while developing self-confidence—gifted children perhaps more so. Discuss how specific children behave and help your child identify those who might share his or her values and interests. Then encourage your child to cultivate friendships with these students by seeking them out for conversations or after-school activities.

For example, if your daughter seems to be in and out of 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.


» Affirm your child by expressing your love, showing affection, and stressing your confidence that your child 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.

» Take advantage of GRC's rich middle school curriculum and its emphasis on developing interpersonal skills. GRC has long recognized that gifted children need so much more than enriched curriculum. For example, the topic of this summer's inservice for teachers was "How to help gifted children deal with being gifted" — a direct focus on their psychosocial development, not 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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For more information regarding Gifted Resource Council, please call the GRC office at **314-962-5920**

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*This page was last updated: 05/19/2004 07:46:02.*

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