



the family connection

News to use for families of young adolescents

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Which is harder, being a middle schooler or being the parent of one?

Lori Day

Sometimes I don't know what is harder—being a middle schooler, or being the parent of one. I've always felt that the wounds your child receives cut you more deeply than those received personally. I often say that seventh grade was the worst year of my life. Many of my friends echo that sentiment. But when my daughter was in seventh grade, that was a brand new exercise in vicarious misery; and while it would be hyperbolic to say that my child's seventh grade year was the worst year of my life, it was certainly wounding to both of us.

A personal story

My teenage daughter, CDK, had been friends with the same group of girls since kindergarten. Once in middle school, sands were shifting. This once studious group of girls had entered puberty, and those who emerged as popular determined that being cool was more important than being smart. Disrespecting teachers, showing off for other kids, and talking constantly in class suddenly became the new normal. CDK became the typical "follower," finding herself getting into trouble at school and getting into trouble a second time at home. She decided she needed a game-changer, but had no idea how to extricate herself from her clique of longtime friends and associate herself with a different group of kids she longed to join. It all came down to planning for the day she would abruptly switch lunch tables, sit at different desks, and set herself up for certain bullying.

As a parent, it was agonizing to witness my daughter's pain and anxiety and to observe how all-consuming this social drama had become, at the expense of academics, a healthy diet, and sleep. The social lives and social status of middle schoolers, especially girls, is *the* most important thing, make no mistake about it. Parents and teachers can talk until they are blue in the face about how little these things will matter a few years down the road, and not one syllable of that will be heard by young adolescents who believe otherwise.

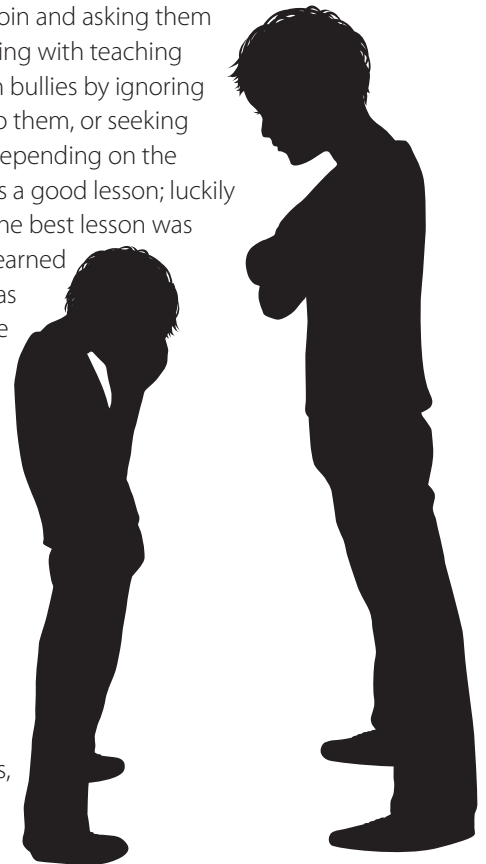
Back to the story of CDK and her destiny to be bullied. She wasn't. Miracle of miracles, she was mostly ignored, which was fine with her. She suffered snide e-mails for a couple of days, and then everyone moved on. Middle school children often bully in situations like this, but sometimes they don't. My parental anxiety—hard-earned by a childhood full of bullying—set me up to project this prophesy onto my daughter. She now says that I prepared her beautifully *and* over-prepared her.

Talking to kids about bullying

I think I did the right thing by prepping her for each step she would need to take, beginning with talking to the group of girls she wanted to join and asking them to help her, and ending with teaching her how to deal with bullies by ignoring them, standing up to them, or seeking adult intervention, depending on the circumstances. It was a good lesson; luckily it was not needed. The best lesson was my own, because I learned that my daughter was not doomed to relive my own childhood. The dénouement resulted in a less anxious mother *and* a more resilient kid.

What are other parents saying?

A middle school father I interviewed, who also develops emotional literacy programs for schools, had this to say:



My eldest son is in seventh grade, and, yes, this can be a very challenging time for young people, not to mention an educational tornado for parents, but I think had I not submersed myself into learning how to guide him in developing a “growth mindset” and building upon his character strengths, things could have been far more challenging. We have dealt with, and still are dealing with, bullying at his school, and given this is an age group for which social status and friends mean so much, bullying can really throw a wrench into cultivating happiness and optimism. Emotional literacy is the necessary foundation to building a joyful life and is proven to reduce stress and anxiety. But those of us who play a role in our children’s lives must “put on our oxygen masks first.”

This father, and most of the other parents of middle schoolers I interviewed about bullying, had one thing in common: engagement. Most tended to be emotionally connected to their kids, to foster open communication, and to directly mentor their children. The parents I talked to who expressed that bullying was a natural part of childhood, necessary to “toughen kids up” and so forth, were the ones whose kids seemed to be struggling the most.

The middle school years through the rearview

Now 20, my daughter looks back on her middle school years with a lot more magnanimity than I have for mine. “In elementary school, kids are friends because they like to play the same things at recess or on play dates. In middle school, kids develop their own interests and choose friends who share them. I think what happened to me is that the playground games that bound my first group of friends together was not enough to keep us together when we got to middle school, and although the official break was difficult in some ways, in other ways, it was natural and necessary,” an older, wiser CDK told me recently.

As I squint down the road, watching the receding taillights of my daughter’s childhood, I finally feel OK about not needing to be in the driver’s seat. I would not go back to those years for anything, but we both survived them.

Today’s kids live in a brave new world, and the early teenage years are rarely easy for anyone. There is no silver bullet that makes the pain go away for parents or kids, but parents can play a role in their middle schoolers’ lives that will make these years easier for both parties.

Recommendations:

Nurture self-esteem, resilience, and happiness in children.

- Try not to hover and micromanage. Helicopter parents love their children, but they don’t make it easy for them to grow up.
- Let kids make mistakes and experience small failures. These are crucial to developing an ego that is not fragile.
- Praise effort more than achievement, as over-praising the latter undermines the former.
- Encourage kids to find at least one activity or hobby they are good at and feel passionate about. There is little difference in self-esteem among children with many talents but a big difference in self-esteem between children with one nurtured talent and those with no nurtured talents.

For much more on raising resilient children read [this article](#).

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