



Harvard Health Publishing

HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL

Supporting a Bullied Middle Schooler

By [Jacqueline Sperling](#), PhD

August 23, 2021

The door bangs shut. Your teen is home from middle school with their head hanging down and in disbelief. When you ask how the day went, they bury their head in their hands, cry, and share that their best friend is spreading rumors about them all over school and not letting them sit with any friends at lunch.

Your heart sinks. Maybe you recall the many ways in which middle school can be a relationship battleground. You might find yourself feeling protective and ready to call the friend's parents to give them a piece of your mind, but resist that urge if you can. One of the best ways to support your teen is simply being there for them right now. How do you do that, and what else can you do? Below are three helpful tips.

Validate first

Before you think about problem-solving, it's important to start with validation. Validation acknowledges how your teen is feeling without agreeing or disagreeing with the emotional experience. When you validate, it shows your teen that you hear them, helps them manage the intensity of their distress, and makes their ears more likely to open up and hear what you have to say next.

In this example, you might say, "You must be feeling so betrayed." Even though you might long to try to make the pain go away, it's important to send a message that emotions are helpful and not hurtful to us. Avoid phrases such as, "Forget her!" Despite kind intentions, words like these inadvertently send the message that your teen should not be having strong feelings about this experience.

When you validate, aim to describe the emotion or lead with a tentative approach, such as "You're really [insert emotion here]" or "You seem [insert emotion here]." Avoid starting with phrases like "I know" or "I understand." Developmentally, teens go through a stage in which they think no one else knows what it's like for them. They are also tasked with separating themselves from their parents, so they may bristle when you try to relate to them during emotional experiences.

Teach antibullying tools

After validating your teen's emotional experience, let them know that you're proud of them for sharing this with you. By doing so, you help reinforce that

it's important for teens to let adults know when these events happen and to have an outlet for feelings.

Next, you can offer to talk through some ways to handle the situation, if they want to and when they're ready. This approach allows your teen to come to you when open to hearing ideas. If you have that conversation, it can be helpful for teens to understand why some people might bully. You could say, "Although this doesn't make your experience any less painful, sometimes it helps to learn that those who bully usually do not feel very good about themselves. They bully to try to make others feel smaller or worse than they feel."

You can add that in middle school, relationship-based bullying tends to happen more often as classmates play a bigger role. (For younger children, please see my previous blog post about [supporting a bullied child](#).)

As challenging as it can be, let your teen know that it's important not to show the bully that efforts to bring your teen down are working. That's like hitting the jackpot in a slot machine. If the classmate keeps putting money in a slot machine and never gets any money in return, they'll most likely give up. Attention is like a cash reward from a slot machine. Withholding the desired attention is key to persuading a bully to leave you alone. This includes not even making eye contact, or saying "You're wasting your time" or "That doesn't bother me." *Any* attention is like a prize from the slot machine.

How does your teen do that? Ask them to talk through specific steps they can take. They could start a conversation with another classmate at the table instead. Even if this classmate isn't a potential new best friend, having other social interactions or even focusing fully on how lunch tastes instead of what the bully is saying is like giving the bully zero coins from the slot machine. Your teen can turn their head and body away from the bully and in the direction of other classmates at the table to show interest in others and no attention to the bully. If peers ask questions about what the bully is saying, your teen as calmly as possible can share that the rumors are not true and change the topic to help move the conversation forward.

Parents can inform school staff members so that staff can monitor interactions between your teen and the bully and intervene if needed. Although this is an option, it's also important to teach your teen how to support themselves in these situations. [StopBullying.gov](#) offers tools for parents and children to help prevent and address bullying of all kinds, including cyberbullying. You can also visit the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry website for answers to [frequently asked questions about bullies and bullying](#).

Practice makes progress

Have your teen, if willing, role-play with you to practice these steps and feel more confident in trying them in school. Let your teen see what could happen depending on how they do or don't respond before you pause to discuss. That

way, they can see for themselves what the potential consequences could be without stopping them mid-roleplay for corrections. If your teen's reaction was not in line with their goal, ask if they have other ideas for an approach and/or would like to hear your suggestions. This allows your teen to invite your feedback — and be more likely to receive it.

In addition to the work done at home, it also may be helpful for your teen to meet with a school guidance counselor or mental health provider. These meetings can offer additional support and a safe space to share these experiences. Even if a teen is working on not giving the classmate attention, they still may need a place to grieve the loss of a friendship. Bullying is hurtful and unacceptable. Nevertheless, you still can empower your teen to take a stand and thrive by practicing these tools.

About the author:

Jacqueline Sperling, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, faculty at Harvard Medical School, and the cofounder and co-program director of the [McLean Anxiety Mastery Program](#) at McLean Hospital. She is also the author of the young adult nonfiction book *Find Your Fierce: How to Put Social Anxiety in Its Place*. Dr. Sperling specializes in implementing evidence-based treatments, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, and working with youth who present with anxiety disorders and/or obsessive-compulsive disorder. She also focuses on providing parent guidance by using treatments, such as behavioral parent training, to help families address children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

<https://www.mcleanhospital.org/media/supporting-bullied-middle-schooler>

Disclaimer:

As a service to our readers, Harvard Health Publishing provides access to our library of archived content. Please note the date of last review or update on all articles. No content on this site, regardless of date, should ever be used as a substitute for direct medical advice from your doctor or other qualified clinician.

[McLean Hospital](#) (formerly known as Somerville Asylum and Charlestown Asylum) is a psychiatric hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. It is noted for its clinical staff expertise and neuroscience research and is also known for the large number of famous people who have been treated there. McLean maintains the world's largest neuroscientific and psychiatric research program in a private hospital. It is the largest psychiatric facility of [Harvard Medical School](#), an affiliate of Massachusetts General Hospital, and part of Mass General Brigham, which also includes Brigham and Women's Hospital.