How to talk to your middle-schooler (so they might actually listen to you)

(James Yang/for The Washington Post)
By Phyllis Fagell
August 20, 2019 at 6:00 a.m. PDT

My friend Michelle Hoffman's son Alex, 13, was an open book when he was in elementary school. "If something good happened, we heard about it; if something bad happened, we heard about it," she says. But in seventh grade, he entered what Hoffman calls "his grunting phase."

"I'd ask, 'How was school?' and he'd say, 'Eh.' " His processing shifted from external to internal, she explains, adding that, "suddenly, we weren't part of it, and that felt really bad."

Middle-schoolers need their parents' support as much as — if not more than — when they were younger, but as a school counselor, I know this is when once-foolproof communication strategies can stop working. Tweens can bewilder their parents by toggling inconsistently between seeking affection and demanding privacy, soliciting advice and asserting independence.

Here are eight ways you can disrupt that dynamic, and stay connected to your child during a phase that's defined by contradictions and flux.

Understand the developmental phase

Your middle-schooler is becoming less childlike, and "one of the forms this takes is wanting to share less with one's parents because to kids, that can feel 'babyish,' " says Lisa Damour, author of "Untangled" and "Under Pressure." "A child who retreats to their room more often should be seen as a sign of developmental progress and not be taken personally."

Tweens have to manage intense highs and lows and are micromanaged all day, so be prepared to talk on their time. "A lot of kids need time to restore themselves after school," Damour says. "It's not that they're shutting the parent out, it's that they need to not talk to anyone." She adds that a common dynamic is that parents will pepper their child with questions when they first see them and the child is too exhausted to talk. Then, when the kid does want to talk about something that happened in math class or at lunch, the parent has turned their attention elsewhere.

Take the small stuff seriously

For middle-schoolers, even minor incidents can be distressing. When Sofia Flynn, now 16, attended a seventh-grade dance with friends from her old school, a few of them spent the evening making mean comments about kids across the room, saying one girl's dress was "so ugly, it looks like a carpet."

“I felt guilty for not saying anything, and also vulnerable, because I’d been excluded on and off in the past,” Sofia says. “That could have been me.” Later that night, she crawled into her parents’ bed and started crying. “I told my mom I felt like I didn’t belong, that I had known these friends since I was 5 and it was like outgrowing a favorite pair of pajamas.”

She still remembers how well her mother handled her distress. “She hugged me and let me blabber, and never once lectured me or said, ‘This is silly.’ ” Her mother also shared her own memories of feeling excluded. Sofia remembers thinking, “If my smart, awesome mom could be a teen and handle friend drama, then I could handle it, too.”

Teen suicides are on the rise. Here’s what parents can do to slow the trend.

Recently, her mother told Sofia, “I felt like I was able to help you that night, and I wish I’d been able to do that for you more in middle school.” Sofia told her she did just fine, and the moment was meaningful precisely because it was small. “When you connect on the simple, relatable things,” she says, “you lay the groundwork for talking about the big stuff.”

Find a neutral zone

The prevailing myth is that middle-schoolers seek drama, but most hate it, and they definitely don’t want to deal with drama from parents. Before engaging in conversation, assess whether you’re able to approach your child from a stance of curiosity, not criticism.

Middle-schoolers tend to be exquisitely sensitive to any sign of disapproval, so adopt a neutral facial expression and tone, give them your full attention and don’t assume you know best. Don’t pry into their personal life or ask accusatory questions such as, “Why did you do that?” While you’re at it, eliminate the phrase “I told you so” from your language.

If you come across as judgmental, “your child will feel as if you’re diminishing him or her,” explains social psychologist Susan Newman, author of “Little Things Long Remembered: Making Your Children Feel Special Every Day.” The result, she adds, will be a defensive, uncommunicative child.

Know your triggers

The middle school transition can be tough for parents, especially if they’re used to being more involved in their child’s life. Parents also may bring their own painful memories to the table. Rachel Simmons, the author of “The Curse of the Good Girl” and “Enough as She Is,” cautions parents not to over-identify with their child’s struggles, whether they relate to appearance, friendship, academics or athletics.

“Ask yourself, ‘Am I revisiting my stuff or dealing with their stuff?’ ” she says. “What would you say if you knew everything would be fine? Say that.”

If you're easily triggered, pay attention to the sensations in your body just before you lose your cool. Does your heart race? Are your shoulders tense? You may need to take a deep breath or process with a friend or partner before you talk to your child. If you do lose control, apologize.

Be clear your love is unconditional

Your middle-schooler is wrestling with identity issues and impossible cultural ideals at an age when they most want to belong and fit in. Make it clear your love is unwavering. Sofia recalls how good it felt when her parents sent her an article about LGBTQ+ issues right after she told them in seventh grade that she was questioning her sexuality.

"It was so validating," she says, "especially in middle school, when it's hard to know whether you're experiencing romantic or physical attraction or a crush — or just want to be someone's buddy."

No matter what your child reveals, resist the temptation to say, 'You're too young to know."

"If your kid is bold enough to talk to you, they just want to hear, 'We support you no matter what, and it's okay to try out different labels until you find the one that fits you best,' " Sofia adds.

Don't put the burden on them to ask for help

Middle- schoolers often feel like an enigma to themselves, and they may not even recognize when they're depressed, overwhelmed or need your help. That's why 13-year-old Amelia Otte says parents should never ask a child, "Are you okay?"

"We'll always say, 'I'm fine,' " she says. "It's the biggest lie we tell." Once a child denies being upset, they may feel they've lost the chance to ask for support. Instead, Amelia advises saying, "Hey, I can tell you're a little off. Let's talk today."

Experiment with different forms of communication

Talking isn't the only way to connect. Identify interests you can explore together, whether it's baseball, video games or dystopian novels. Sofia shares a love of music with her father and calls it "a neutral starting point for dialogue."

"One sweet memory is the time we tried to introduce each other to the same indie rock band during a car ride," she says, adding that her dad also once surprised her with tickets to see Taylor Swift. "He was obviously not interested in seeing Taylor Swift, but he went with me because he knew I wanted to go, and that meant a lot."

Treat arguing and complaining as productive

"Middle-schoolers communicate by complaining, and that is them giving us a detailed account of their day," Damour says. Rather than challenge or question their complaints, let them unload and

then ask, “Do you want my advice or do you just need to vent?” One child told Damour, “When I tell my parents about my day, the only thing I want them to say back to me is, ‘That stinks.’ ”

“A complaining child is dumping the psychological trash of the day so they can go back in the next day unencumbered,” Damour adds.

Similarly, when your child argues with you, it’s because they respect you and want to know what you’re thinking.

Hoffman discovered a way to connect with her son by the time he finished seventh grade: “I told him we were curious about his day, period, and we weren’t looking for something to fix or to pry, because that’s what he believed.” She also stuck to impersonal questions, asking what his teachers had taught him rather than what he had learned. When that seemed to work, she said, “You’re talking to me again! Is it because I’m not asking anything too personal?”

“Well, yeah,” he responded.

Hoffman discovered it’s possible to connect with even the most uncommunicative middle-schooler — as long as it’s on their terms.

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To raise independent kids, treat middle school like a dress rehearsal for life

By Braden Bell
September 7, 2018 at 3:00 a.m. PDT

My fifth — and last — child is starting middle school this year. I'm also a middle school teacher, and I've been thinking a lot about what I'll do differently this time. Most of the changes stem from being realistic about what middle school is — and isn't.

Years ago I was directing a play and we had a rough first dress rehearsal. Some of the parents worried the play would be terrible, and wanting to please them, I spent more time backstage during rehearsals, micromanaging everything. At first this helped; subsequent rehearsals were smoother. Unfortunately, my students got used to me being backstage managing everything. They didn't learn to think for themselves, make decisions, or struggle through challenges to find solutions. The play never became theirs, so it never reached its potential.

The goal of a successful production is not a polished dress rehearsal. That confuses the process and product. Sometimes the best productions have messy dress rehearsals because the only way to integrate the complexities of scenery, costumes, props, lights, sound and special effects is to make mistakes.

Middle school is a dress rehearsal. It's almost always messy, and we worry that it foreshadows a disastrous future for our children. Meaning well, we jump in and initiate, fix and micromanage, telling ourselves we will stop when the child matures enough to take over. But middle school is supposed to be messy. It's how kids mature. This means making lots of mistakes, then experiencing consequences just strong enough to be an incentive for correction, but not strong enough to damage a life.

In her book, *"*The Gift of Failure*,"* Jessica Lahey points out that the ultimate goal of all parenting should be to help our children be autonomous and competent. With that goal in mind, I'm going to do things a bit differently with middle school this time around.

I'm not going to intervene. I work in the same school, so this can be difficult; Papa Bear wants to save the day. But I need to refrain. There will be times he'll feel his teachers are unfair or his peers are mean. He might even be right. But letting him handle this won't hurt him; it will teach him some important lessons, such as how to resolve problems. So, unless he's in real danger of physical or emotional harm, I won't intervene. Difficulty and discouragement don't equal danger. Most routine actions from a teacher, coach or administrator — including grades, class placement, discipline or playing time — will not hurt my child's future.

If necessary, I might contact a teacher to help facilitate a discussion. And I might go with him to provide support if he wants to inquire about a grade or a disciplinary issue. But he needs to learn

to resolve his own problems. If I must step in, I'll begin with the most minimal intervention possible. I can always escalate later, but it's almost impossible to ratchet back down.

If I don't step back in middle school, when will I start? High school? College? His first job? When he's married with children? Every problem I solve simply delays the time when he'll take responsibility for himself.

I'll try to give the gift of perspective. This is closely related to not intervening. Middle school can be an extraordinarily difficult time for students. Living through all the changes — social, physical, emotional — is enormously complex, and that's before adding academic and extracurricular stresses. A chick emerges from an egg and a butterfly from a chrysalis. Both require tremendous effort and strength. And if you were to pause on only one moment of that process it might seem terrible. In middle school, a day can truly seem like a lifetime. A relatively minor event can assume epic and tragic proportions in the mind of an adolescent. It's easy as an adult to either discount these times or to overreact.

One of the greatest gifts adults can give at these times is to listen with empathy and then to provide assurance that this does not last forever, that things will get better. Parents could respond to almost every difficult moment with some version of, "I am so sorry. I know this is hard. It will be okay. You can do this. It will pass, I promise."

I'll focus on effort, not outcomes. My son's future happiness and success will be determined largely by his ability to work hard and to push through difficulties. To that end, I want to reinforce work ethic, determination and kindness, particularly in academics. I want him to get good grades, but I'm more concerned with his effort. He needs to learn to think, to read and to write.

I have to accept that he might not do well on a test or assignment, or even in an entire subject. In the past, I fretted about grades, and they are not unimportant. But if he learns to study and prepare, to persist and persevere, that is more important. He needs to learn to plan his time and balance his priorities. The right habits will eventually help yield good grades. But simply focusing on grades and other achievements — as I've done in the past — will not build those habits. Grades, awards, team placements: none will matter or last beyond middle school. Habits, attitudes, attributes and relationships will endure, good or bad.

I'm going to help him develop empathy. I've seen many well-intentioned parents end up reinforcing narcissism in their child by accepting the child's feelings about any situation and allowing that to be their guiding truth. They then respond to perceived slights with all their influence and power. When my son has disagreements, frustrations, conflicts or disputes, I'm going to listen and empathize. But I'm also going to ask questions about what the other person might be thinking or feeling. Most adolescents are keenly aware of how they feel but are almost completely, sometimes comically, unable to see the other side of any situation. Empathy can be broken down into learning to imagine what someone else is seeing, thinking and feeling. That's a skill that can be practiced.

I'll laugh and enjoy the ride. Middle school is when children are old enough to be more independent while still being young enough to be affectionate and childlike. It's a special time, and it goes fast. Soon my son will be in high school, then college, and he will be much more involved with his peers than his parents. I need to relax and enjoy this time, trusting the process and simply experiencing it with him. That means laughing together, doing things he wants to do, not overreacting and generally building memories. Getting stressed and worried is a very human reaction, but it creates tension, which skews perspective and makes problem-solving more difficult. What is worse, it can allow momentary stresses to damage long-term relationships. Laughter is a powerful corrective. It helps create perspective, defuses tense situations and gives grace to someone who feels that they have failed.

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