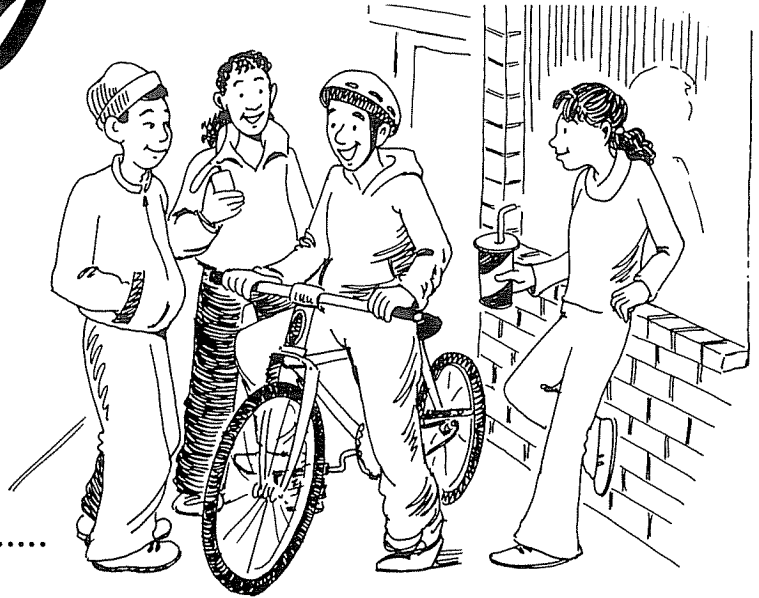


Building Social Skills

Shifting friendships, more time spent with peers, and roller-coaster emotions make the middle years exciting and challenging. But life is easier when children know how to be a good friend, resolve conflicts, and deal with feelings. Try these suggestions for helping your youngster develop strong social skills.



FRIENDSHIP

Having friends to spend time with and confide in is an important part of the middle years. Help your child be a good friend with these ideas:

- Friends show they care about each other. Encourage your youngster to take the time to listen to a friend and to ask questions about her—instead of just talking about herself. If a friend has a problem, she should be sympathetic and try to help.
- Three's a crowd—but it doesn't have to be. Talk to your child about how to make everyone feel included when she's hanging out with a group. For instance, she can ask a quieter person her opinion or suggest a game that everyone can play (charades, capture the flag).
- Although rumors and gossip are common at this age, your middle grader can do her part to reduce them. Remind her that talking behind people's backs hurts her, too. A friend may think, "If she talks this way about other people, what does she say about me when I'm not around?" Role-play standing up to a person who is spreading gossip ("I have a hard time believing that... have you talked to her about it?") and then changing the subject ("Are you going to the basketball game this weekend?").

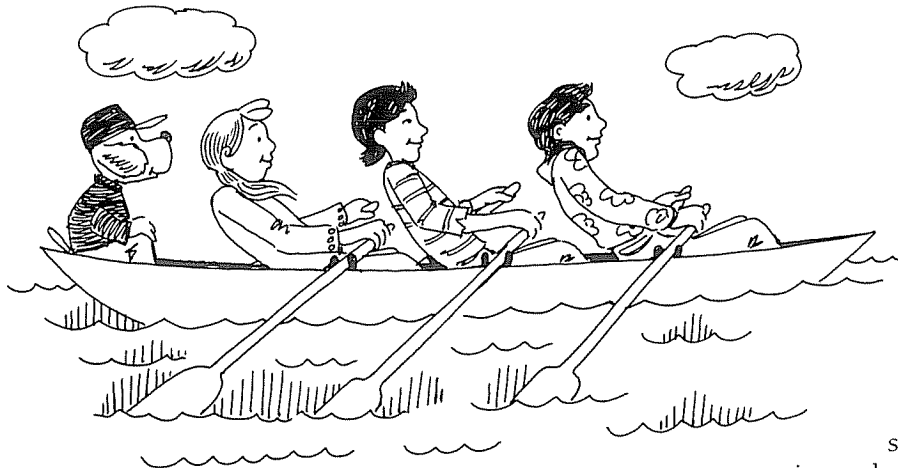
SOCIAL CUES

Does your child know what to say and how to understand body language? Share these tips to help him master the art of conversation:

- If your youngster approaches kids who are in the middle of a conversation, he should wait for a pause before jumping in. Remind him to stay on topic when possible or to use what one person says as a springboard to a new subject ("We go to that beach, too. What do you think of...?").
- Nodding, smiling, and looking you in the eye all show that someone is interested in what you're saying. On the other hand, moving or looking away may signal that a person is ready to stop talking. If your child senses these cues, he might excuse himself politely ("Well, I've got to go. Nice talking to you!").
- Remind your middle grader to be aware of a person's face, posture, and tone of voice when he's talking. If a classmate says, "That's great," but he's rolling his eyes or shrugging his shoulders, he may not mean it the way it sounds.



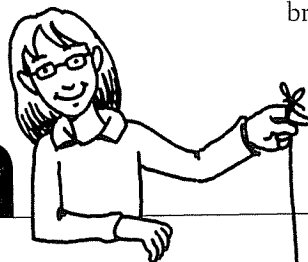
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PROBLEM SOLVING

A true test of your middle grader's social skills comes when a conflict arises. Prepare her for tough spots with these strategies:

- Teach your child to use "I" messages (telling someone how she feels instead of placing blame or name-calling). For example, rather than telling a friend, "You didn't return my game. You can never borrow anything from me again!" your middle schooler could say, "When you borrow something of mine and don't return it, I get upset." Then, they can discuss the problem calmly and find a solution.
- Compromising can end a disagreement. Explain that compromising means that each person gives up something and gains something. Say your child and a friend can't agree on a movie to watch. They might compromise by choosing another one. Or they could flip a coin to see who gets to decide and agree that the other person gets to choose the next two times.



IT'S A BIG WORLD!

Getting along with people of different backgrounds will help your middle grader in school now and in the workplace later. Try these three strategies:

1. Suggest that your youngster concentrate on what she has in common with others rather than on ways they're different. She can make an effort to get to know someone by thinking of several things they can talk about. She might mention a popular reality show she enjoys or a book she's reading.
2. Your middle grader doesn't need to speak the same language as another child to become friends. They'll just have to be creative! For instance, she can invite someone to join



a kickball game by miming a kick and nodding her head toward the field. Tell your child to speak in her normal tone while using gestures. A student who is learning English probably understands more words than she speaks.

3. Set an example by showing respect and appreciation for all kinds of people. If you hear your middle schooler or someone else put down a person because of her culture or a disability, make it clear that it's wrong. Remind your child that being a good friend means accepting people with different traits and abilities and not criticizing them.

FEELINGS

Learning to manage emotions helps youngsters maintain relationships. Show your child how with these ideas:

- Your middle schooler may feel left out if a friend stops spending time with him or starts hanging out with a different crowd. Before he assumes the friendship is over, suggest that he try to make plans ("Hey, want to come over after school tomorrow?"). If his friend makes excuses or seems disinterested after a couple of invitations, it may be time to accept that they've grown apart. To help your child talk about his feelings, you might tell him about a friendship of yours that ended. As time goes by, gently encourage him to make new friends.

- Teach your youngster to handle his anger. First, talk about warning signs that you're about to lose your temper (flushed face, rapid heartbeat). If your middle grader feels this way during an argument, he should take a deep breath and walk away. Explain that taking a break like this is a sign of strength, not weakness. He can come back later and work things out when he has a clear head.



Middle Years