

How to Help Tweens and Teens Manage Social Conflict

Don't add to the drama. Take it in stride and coach your kids as they work to resolve things on their own.

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By [Lisa Damour](#)

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A middle school girl scrolling through Instagram discovers that she's been left out of a friend's party. She becomes understandably upset and looks to her parents for advice. Situations like this may be common, but that doesn't mean that the adults will always know just what to say.

Indeed, as children turn into teenagers they become more [devoted to their peers](#), but also [more likely to come into conflict](#) with them. In middle and high school, social friction and hurt feelings often come with the territory, with the risk of causing intense [emotional stress](#) both for the tweens and teenagers themselves, and also for the grown-ups who care for them.

“Conflict is unavoidable and can be a point of growth,” says Andrea Shaffer, who has often called on her conflict resolution training during 27 years of teaching and coaching at the private preschool-grade 12 Chicago Waldorf School.

While there are times when adults should step in, according to Blake Revelle, principal of Indian Hills Middle School, a public school in Prairie Village, Kan., “our job as parents and educators is to set up some bumpers on the bowling alley, not to dictate the exact way the ball goes down the lane.

Grown-ups are probably most helpful to young people when we take their social turmoil in stride and have strategies to coach them along as they work to resolve things on their own.

Don't Confuse Conflict With Bullying

When our child suffers a social injury, it's easy to conclude that he or she has been bullied. While this may be the case, [experts suggest](#) that the term bullying is best reserved for repeated, one-way aggression against someone who cannot defend him or herself effectively. The remaining, more prevalent type of social friction — the give and take of interpersonal strife — should be considered to be conflict, not bullying.

Social discord “rarely involves bullying,” explains Phyllis Fagell, a counselor at the Sheridan School, a private school in Washington, D.C., and the author of the forthcoming book “[Middle School Matters](#).” “Most commonly, conflict stems from anything ranging from a misunderstood comment, to a spilled secret, to a lopsided friendship.”

Diagnosing the problem correctly is critical to choosing the right intervention. We might view conflict as the common cold of social ailments: an unpleasant and unavoidable consequence of human contact that can be addressed with home remedies. Bullying, however, is more akin to pneumonia. It's comparatively rare and requires urgent, expert treatment.

Getting the diagnosis right may call for the help of adults with an objective view of the situation, such as teachers, coaches or counselors. If your child is being bullied, you'll want to take a [measured, evidence-based approach](#) to the problem. If, instead, the young person in your life is involved in a conflict, you can suggest adaptive strategies for managing it.

Teach Healthy Conflict

The range of human reaction when faced with conflict is a knotty topic, but I have heard teachers boil it down with the help of [a few metaphors](#) kids can readily picture. There are basically three unhealthy ways to participate in conflict: you can be a *bulldozer*, a *doormat* or a *doormat with spikes*. The first simply runs others over while the second agrees to be run over. The third seems to let itself be run over, but makes the aggressor pay a price on the back end by employing passive-aggressive tactics such as involving third parties in what should be a one-on-one dispute, using guilt as a weapon or playing the part of the victim.

Another response that is far healthier — though it usually needs to be coached and practiced — is to be a *pillar*, to stand up for yourself while being respectful of others.

When we, at any age, are upset with someone, most of us are naturally tempted toward an unhealthy, instinctive response. In advising adolescents on how they might handle a disagreement, I first teach them about reactions to conflict and allow them to daydream their way through a bulldozer, doormat or doormat-with-spikes response.

For the girl who sees on Instagram that she was left out of a friend's party, there might be some welcome pain relief in imagining her doormat-with-spikes revenge. Having had the chance to fantasize about the short-term gratification that would come with posting an unflattering image of the supposed friend usually helps clear the way toward formulating a pillar response. Might she ask — politely and in person — if she had done something to hurt her friend's feelings?

When addressing conflict with tweens and teenagers, I rush to point out that fights carried out online are inevitably doormat-with-spikes affairs. Social media recruits a giant audience into disputes that would have been best handled in private, and may leave a public record of emotional responses a cooler-headed teen might soon regret. And digital exchanges don't allow for the tone control that pillar communications always require.

“Kids may need to be reminded,” says Ms. Fagell, “to keep arguments offline. Because once they've waged war in a group chat at one in the morning, it becomes much harder to achieve a peaceful resolution.”

Let Them Pick Their Battles

When young people are at odds with one another, we can help them hold themselves to the pillar standard, but we can also give the option of choosing not to engage at all.

As parents, we may feel the urge to encourage our children to respond to every injury or slight. I'm all for empowerment, especially for girls, but no reasonable adult reacts to every perceived affront. Rather, we constantly make strategic decisions (sometimes conscious, sometimes not) about which ones to address and which to let drop.

Conflict, even when handled well, takes time and tremendous mental energy. In any given situation, we should allow our children to weigh the costs and benefits of engaging in it, perhaps even helping them with the calculation. Do they care about the relationship enough to want to work on it? Do they expect their pillar overture to meet with a similar response?

Making a tactical decision to refrain from a conflict is not the same as making oneself a doormat. If a girl ultimately decides against asking her friend why she was left out of a party, we might need to offer reassurance on that point. "A doormat," we could say, "would be crying about being left out, or kissing up to her in the hopes of being invited next time." In contrast, a considered nonresponse makes room for the situation to unfold further — perhaps to be taken up later — or to come to seem less important with time.

"Contrary to conventional wisdom," adds Ms. Fagell, "kids aren't always looking to restore friendships. They may need permission to move on or need help creating a more comfortable, if distant, interpersonal dynamic."

Teaching our children to pick their battles and to disagree while protecting everyone's dignity will not bring peace to a kingdom of tweens and teenagers. But that's not the aim. As Ms. Shaffer notes, "we don't have emotional Bubble Wrap for children, but we do have ways to help them develop the emotional agility to navigate through difficult situations."

Lisa Damour is a psychologist in Shaker Heights, Ohio, and the author of "Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions Into Adulthood" and the forthcoming ["Under Pressure: Confronting the Epidemic of Stress and Anxiety in Girls." @LDamour • Facebook](#)