

Middle School social conversation

March 20, 2018

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Question: Parents are noticing bullying in middle school. Is this unique or new?

Gail has worked at Salmon Bay for over 3 years. She doesn't notice an escalation in bullying or meanness this year in particular. In general, she spends a fair amount of time doing mediation with sixth graders (mostly girls) regarding online disputes. Prior sixth grade classes had online issues as well. One class created anonymous social media accounts that they posted photos of students matched up as potential couples, with other students commenting and rating the "relationship" below the post. She sees sexting once or twice a year, mostly from 7th and 8th graders. Parents can take a proactive approach and talk with students about when someone asks for a picture, because it's almost certain someone will ask at some point.

Question: How do you define bullying? What else is concerning?

Bullying usually involves an unequal power and is persistently repeated over time. There are many other types of meanness that occur, and that staff and teachers address regularly. It's helpful to let the school know if there is any meanness happening because it is the repetition that defines bullying. Knowing from the start makes it easier to intervene.

One common issue in middle school is trying to maintain an "alpha" position. For some students who were powerful at their elementary school, it feels important to maintain that powerful position into middle school. Being mean to others can be one way of maintaining status. Many students are not trying to be the most powerful, but they may feed into the process by being a bystander. Parents can encourage students to just disengage with meanness and not provide an audience. While some students want to stand up for others, that can also turn into being tough and mean yourself. Being friendly at lunch, smiling at others, inviting them to eat with you, is a great way to respond. Gail says you don't have to be super solid friends with someone to be friendly with them. This may be helpful for parents to repeat. Lessons on empathy and social emotional learning are also a part of the homeroom curriculum for all middle school students.

Question: What are concerns with social media?

Gail has seen sixth graders (mostly girls) do the following things:

- They share all their passwords to social media with each other. They can log onto someone's account and send mean things. These things happen at night or during sleepovers, not usually during school hours.
- They create several accounts, for example one they show parents, one they keep for friends, one for their "slime" or their pet, and some that are completely anonymous. This makes tracking who said what very difficult.
- Students create large group messages with many people. Anyone can then add another person and sometimes students add people they don't know in person to a chat. There

have been safety issues with this. For example, someone could seem to be a child, but is actually an adult man.

Sometimes when Gail suggests blocking unkind people or accounts on social media, students are resistant. They want “likes” and “followers,” and don’t want to give up the numbers. There is a bit of a morbid fascination with the drama.

Seventh and eight graders face sexting challenges.

The school gets involved when parents or students take screenshots of mean interactions, either posts or direct messages (mostly via Instagram or Snapchat). Parents may restrict access to one device, but students may log in from a different device at home, at the library, or at a friend’s house and then the online meanness can continue. It can be difficult to end the interactions.

Question: What can parents do?

Parents can limit access to social media at night. Several parent shared technology approaches to reduce access to social media at night (i.e. using an app to control devices or shutting down wifi in the evening).

Parents can limit or delay introducing social media.

Parents can talk with students about what to do when asked for a photo of her/his body, assuming this will happen at some point.

Parents can limit access to devices at night or at specific times so that students have time and energy to do homework and make connections in real life and don’t feel they have to respond immediately to all messages.

Parents can model connecting with friends in person, putting down devices and staying involved in hobbies or other interests.

FOSB is working on a fall speaker to talk about social media and middle school socializing this fall. Stay tuned!