

CONVERSATION WITH PARENTS: Sex and Drugs and...Social Isolation?

Amy Wilner, Psy.D.

Social isolation exists on the same continuum as bullying and can be understood as bullying's less active—though no less damaging—cousin. A lot of social isolation occurs because people are doing nothing, rather than doing something harmful, so social isolation can be hard to recognize and often goes unnamed. At Beyond Differences, we're trying to change that.

Middle school is a time when it's developmentally important to children to fit in. And because some may fit in less easily than others, they can be left out. Think about the kid who sits by himself at recess or lunch, or the kid who never gets invited to hang out or attend parties. Think about the kid nobody remembers to think about. She might not be being picked on, but she's probably hurting. Maybe it's a kid no one makes fun of to his face, but behind his back someone says, "He's such a weirdo," or "He's so gay."

Maybe your child is being left out. Or maybe your child is confident and popular, but he or she ignores less popular kids. Maybe watching other kids get excluded is too uncomfortable to think about so your child looks away and starts to forget about what she's seen. Maybe when one of your child's friends makes fun of someone to the larger group, your child feels it's wrong but doesn't say anything.

Just as when you talk with your kids about sex and drugs, you should be clear about your own values with respect to social isolation, and your expectations and hopes for their behavior. And, just like with sex and drugs, remember that your kids' choices might not always be what you want. The most important thing is to be there for them to talk with. Let them know you understand how complicated it can be, and remember to ask questions.

Asking questions demonstrates respect and interest, while lecturing can introduce other dynamics and bring

thoughtfulness to a halt. Kids in middle school are just developing the cognitive capacity to anticipate consequences over longer periods of time and are beginning to experience their roles among their peers in different and not always comfortable ways. This means that answering your questions gives them an opportunity to think more deeply about themselves and their choices. And then, because I can't emphasize it enough, listen. What your kids say could surprise you.



Each month, Dr. Wilner answers parents' questions in her online forum, "Conversations with Parents," at www.BeyondDifferences.org/resources/parent-resources/.

BOOK NOOK



Walking a mile in someone else's shoes may be one of the best ways to increase our understanding and empathy. These powerful books are an enjoyable read that give you the opportunity to get to know someone you might not otherwise come across.

An Invisible Thread by Laura Schroff with Alex Tresniowski, Howard Books (November 1, 2011) <http://www.bookpassage.com/book/9781410447869>

Twenty five years ago, Laura Schroff was a single, successful ad sales executive and Maurice Mazyck was an 11-year-old homeless panhandler. When Maurice asked Laura for spare change, she ignored him at first. Then she turned around, took him to lunch at McDonald's, and changed the course of both of their lives. *An Invisible Thread* reminds us of the ability we each have to impact someone else's life and how our own life is enhanced in the process. And Laura and Maurice's story echoes one of the messages of Beyond Differences: the importance of opening our eyes and hearts to the humanity in each individual we meet.

Wonder by R.J. Palacio, Knopf Books for Young Readers (February 14, 2012) <http://www.bookpassage.com/book/9780375869020>

Whether you are a middle schooler or a grandmother, you will be moved by Auggie, the fifth grader whose story is at the heart of this novel. *Wonder* tells the story of a boy whose face is so badly deformed that he spends much of his preschool years hiding under a toy astronaut helmet. When Auggie begins attending school, he experiences the best and worst of his classmates, both making friends and being subjected to taunts. You will laugh and cry as you read this book. And you will be reminded about the kindness and cruelty which exist in people and how we learn to treat each other better.

For more great books for adolescents and parents, please see the suggested reading list created for us by Book Passage in Corte Madera. Go to www.beyonddifferences.org/teen-corner-2.