

By Rayanne Coy, M.A., A.C.C.

In 8th grade, Alison* worried when her best friend Madison stopped returning her phone calls, and made excuses to avoid getting together. As Madison became more involved with a new group of girls, Alison was bewildered and heartbroken to log onto Facebook and see that she had been left out of parties and other fun. One day, when Alison sat at the school lunch table, a girl told her, "You have my seat." She moved, but another girl said the same thing. By the end of the week, she found herself alone and ignored at the end of the table – physically and socially isolated from the group.

Social exclusion is a subtle form of bullying that is common among tweens (9-12 year-olds). Children (especially girls) use it to establish social power and position, and although it's sometimes brushed off as a regrettable but normal phase, it is actually a painful form of social aggression that can leave lasting emotional scars. A 2006 study showed that peer rejection hurts kids socially and academically, as ostracized children avoid school and activities to spare themselves pain.

"There were a lot of tears," said Alison's mom, Nancy. "It created so much self-doubt and really damaged her self-esteem."

When your child is excluded, here are ways that you can help:

- Stay calm and connected. It's much easier for your tween to open up if you can act as a sounding board. Children this age often shut down and try to solve problems by themselves when they feel they can't talk to parents. Avoid making judgment statements or condemning the socially aggressive child. Instead, try short, simple questions like, "What will you do?" or empathize with words like, "That really hurts."
- Be a conscious parent. The most important thing you can do is to reframe your thinking and realize that that you are the only person that you can control. Resist the temptation to react emotionally, and remember your long-term goals as a parent. Although painful, this is an important learning moment for your child. Do you want to lecture, or help your child find his or her own way?
- Encourage emotional self-awareness, compassion and empathy. Help your child get in touch with his or her feelings. Are they feeling sad, hurt, disappointed, angry or jealous? Listen carefully, and encourage your child to talk about what being excluded feels like. When other kids are being excluded, remind your child how it felt and encourage him or her to treat others kindly.
- Help your child discover coping skills. If you expect exclusion to happen at some point in your child's life, it's easier to approach it as an experience that helps develop critical social and emotional



What To Do When Your Tween is EXCLUDED

Turn the pain into an opportunity for growth and connection for both you and your tween.

skills. Ask simple, thoughtful questions like, "What's another way you might approach this?" Stay open, curious, and interested to help your child see alternative ways to manage the situation. Let your child handle it his or her way, and ask how it went. You can help your child view mistakes as chances to learn, and also support creative problem solving.

- Process your feelings in private. It's painful to watch your child suffer through social rejection, but don't add to the drama by reacting with anger or sadness. Instead, vent your feelings to a trusted friend. You may have painful memories of being excluded now or as a child, but it's not helpful to share the details.

Above all, remember your creative, resourceful child is strong enough to figure it out. Your solid belief in him or her builds confidence and is a reassurance that everything will be okay.

Alison eventually decided to let go of the group that excluded her and reach out to others. "She worked hard through the year to build friendships one at a time. By the end, she had a mix of new friends," Nancy said. "I'm really proud of her."

*names changed

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