Responding to Red Flags

There’s no shortage of books and Internet articles that will give you detailed lists for recognizing signs of behavior disorders, learning disabilities, drug and alcohol abuse, and much more. We just want to give you a few broad and basic guidelines for recognizing some behaviors that should raise a red flag. If you notice one or more of the following, it’s worth a second look—and maybe even a visit to a qualified professional for advice and/or treatment.
How to Spot Possible Substance Abuse

“I know people my age who do drugs, and it’s weird just knowing that.”
—A middle schooler

“I know a guy who did drugs in junior high, and one time at church he tried to snort lemonade mix.”
—A middle schooler

“My cousin was in seventh grade and her eighth-grade boyfriend was smoking pot. He told her he quit, but then he got arrested for selling drugs when some kids got caught with drugs and said they’d gotten them from him.”
—A middle schooler

If your child is involved with substance abuse, he or she probably is displaying at least one or two of the following:

• acting especially secretive, demanding excessive privacy and avoiding eye contact
• behavior at school that’s dramatically different from behavior at home
• suddenly changing close friends, or hanging out with a new group of friends you don’t know
• experiencing prolonged and extreme mood swings
• using a lot of profanity or language that’s out of character for the rest of the family
• acting particularly mean or cruel to siblings or friends
• uncharacteristically late with assignments or showing a sudden decline in grades

This is certainly not a comprehensive list. In fact, the most important sign that something’s wrong is good old-fashioned parental instincts. Don’t ignore your personal radar. If you notice a red flag or have any sense of uneasiness, start by talking to your child openly about your concerns. Then talk to others who see your child on a regular basis—teachers, coaches, or parents of their close friends. If you believe there’s a real problem, look for the right professional to help you solve it. Start with a trusted pediatrician or counselor for further evaluation.

Don’t automatically assume the worst—but don’t ignore the obvious, either. Be sure to observe your child’s reaction when you express concern. Often you’ll learn more from what they don’t say than from the responses they give you. The best idea of all is to take the time to talk to your child on a regular basis so that you’ll quickly notice something different in his actions.

**Depression**

“I don’t know what’s wrong. Some days I just want to stay in bed and I feel like crying all the time. It’s like, what’s the point of even getting up? I just don’t care.”

—A middle schooler

Most middle schoolers have bad days, influenced by hormones, circumstances, and lack of sleep, among other causes. How can a parent
know when a middle schooler moves from a bad few days to actual depression?

If you have serious concerns, don’t wait to get help. Ask your pediatrician or family doctor for referral to a therapist, or get advice from your school counselor or psychologist.

If it doesn’t seem that serious yet, make a note of how long your child has been feeling blue. More than a week, especially if there’s no obvious reason (such as failing grades or a breakup), may mean it’s more than just moodiness. Withdrawal from close friends or loss of interest in what used to be a favorite activity may indicate depression, but then again it may mean a falling-out with a friend.

Try asking your middle schooler for insight (see our communication tips in Chapter 7). If you don’t get anywhere with that (and many parents won’t), check in with other adults who work with your child on a regular basis and see what kind of behavior they observe away from home. If their concern mirrors yours, it’s definitely time to seek professional help.

Eating Disorders

“My friend and I just wanted to get in shape for basketball, so she found a diet and we went on it. But now she’s making herself throw up and she hardly eats anything, and she’s made me promise not to tell her mom. I’m so worried, but I don’t want her to get mad at me.”

—A middle schooler

Young people—girls and boys—are under tremendous pressure to have “perfect” (read slender) bodies. They’re also experiencing some
emotional issues that you probably didn’t have to deal with. Those can lead to eating disorders as well.

Warning signs of eating disorders can include:

• wearing long sleeves or loose-fitting clothes, even in warm weather
• disappearing into the bathroom soon after every meal
• picking at or nibbling food
• tooth enamel erosion, especially behind the front teeth (often spotted by a dentist)
• compulsive exercising
• obsessing over diet books or Web sites
• charting weight loss or gain, or stepping on the scale several times a day

Remember, anorexia (starving oneself) is only one type of eating disorder; a person suffering from bulimia (binge eating and purging) may not look excessively thin. Neither will a young person suffering from obesity, of course; the aforementioned signs don’t apply in that case, but treating the condition can be just as crucial.

There are many resources available to parents who suspect their children may suffer from an eating disorder, including the Mayo Clinic Web site or your local children’s hospital. But the first step should be a complete physical with a family physician or pediatrician, especially if the doctor knows your child already.

Bullying

“I didn’t tell my parents when this kid kept kicking me and stealing my stuff, because what could they do?”

—A middle schooler
“There’s this weird guy on Instagram, and he keeps putting bad stuff on people’s pages, like ‘You go cut, you should go kill yourself,’ or ‘You’re so ugly.’ He has a fake profile, so nobody really knows who he is.”

—A middle schooler

When parents hear about bullying in the news, many can’t help but wonder if their child will be—or already is—a victim. Sometimes it’s hard for victims to speak up because it’s embarrassing to admit you’re being picked on. But here are some warning signals that could indicate a bullying situation:

- withdrawal
- a loss of friends
- a drop in grades
- a loss of interest in activities he or she previously enjoyed
- torn clothing
- bruises
- a need for extra money or supplies

When parents suspect there’s bullying going on in middle school, they should alert the teacher. Before demanding consequences, however, they need to wait until they get the whole picture. Sometimes it’s a true bullying situation, where a stronger child is making life miserable for a younger or weaker one; but often it’s a more complicated situation with at least partial blame on both sides. Teachers often wade into situations thinking they know who’s guilty, only to discover the alleged victims have been doing their share of harassing. Some middle schoolers are very crafty at manipulating the situation to shift blame from themselves, especially if they have a parent who doesn’t believe the child could ever cause trouble—and who has a habit of going to school to rescue the schemer.
Bully or Victim?

Two eighth grade boys came to me and said Jack had shoved Todd up against the wall in the boys’ locker room and wasn’t letting him go. I quickly alerted our principal, who went in to break it up. Before he suspended the perpetrator, he talked to several boys to get the whole story. As it turned out, Jack had grabbed Todd to keep him from throwing a punch at Brent—who had been calling Todd names throughout gym class.

—Sue Acuña

The Tough Guy

“When my brother was in seventh grade and I was in fourth grade, another guy called him a ‘queer’ for talking to the little kids. I didn’t know what that was, but my teacher told me it was bad, so I felt bad for him.”

—A middle schooler

Boys who are bullies are often easy to spot because they use direct attacks in the form of name calling or physical contact. Sometimes the bully is the classic bigger, tougher kid who shoves his way to the front of the line or makes derisive comments in class. But sometimes he’s smaller than the other boys and uses bullying tactics to get attention or to show that he’s tougher than he looks. A boy who bullies to get attention will repeatedly take things that belong to someone else. He may also provoke the students he views as powerful by telling them what other people are saying about them, whether it’s true or not.

Dealing with boy bullies is a fairly straightforward issue: Warn
them that if it keeps happening there will be consequences, and then empower the other students to let you know if they witness any more incidents. Victims of the bully are not likely to turn him in for fear of repercussions, so it’s more effective for students who observe him in action to say something, with the assurance that they will remain anonymous.

**Mean Girls**

“I was in a class with a girl who was a bully, and I just tried not to make her mad because if she got mad at you she would get everybody else to be mad at you, and then there would be drama.”

—A middle schooler

Unlike a bullying boy, girl bullies can be hard to spot. A girl who bullies other girls may be outspoken with her snide comments and disapproving attitude. She may intimidate other girls or call them names in front of other people. But a girl bully can be so well behaved in class that the teacher has no idea what’s going on in other places—or even when her back is turned.

Girl bullies can use subtle means of communicating their dislike for another girl, including an eye roll, a toss of the head, or a meaningful look exchanged with someone across the room. These mean girls will snort or look away when their victims speak in class or walk by the lunch table; boys or adults in the same room may not pick up on it, but other girls have gotten the message.

Social media is a powerful weapon in the hands of a girl who wants
to hurt other girls. Simply posting pictures of an event can be a way of communicating rejection because the pictures serve as a way of letting other girls know they weren’t invited. Things can get vicious when girls make derogatory comments about another girl who may not be a member of the site; someone will always take it upon herself to inform the victim about mean things that have been said about her.

Dealing with a girl bully can be tricky because she can be so sneaky in how she attacks. It gets complex when the victim is doing her share of bullying behind the scenes, because the other girls will usually take sides and deny anything is going on—or tell only half the truth. Confrontation by an adult can lead to repercussions for the victims, who are then afraid to report continued hostilities. Still, only when victims are empowered to tell adults what’s happening can anything be done. Girls are encouraged to take screen shots of any cyberbullying (Internet or phone) they experience, and to refrain from responding in kind. They should also be reminded that looking a bully in the eye takes power away from her; walking past with your head down encourages her to pick on you.