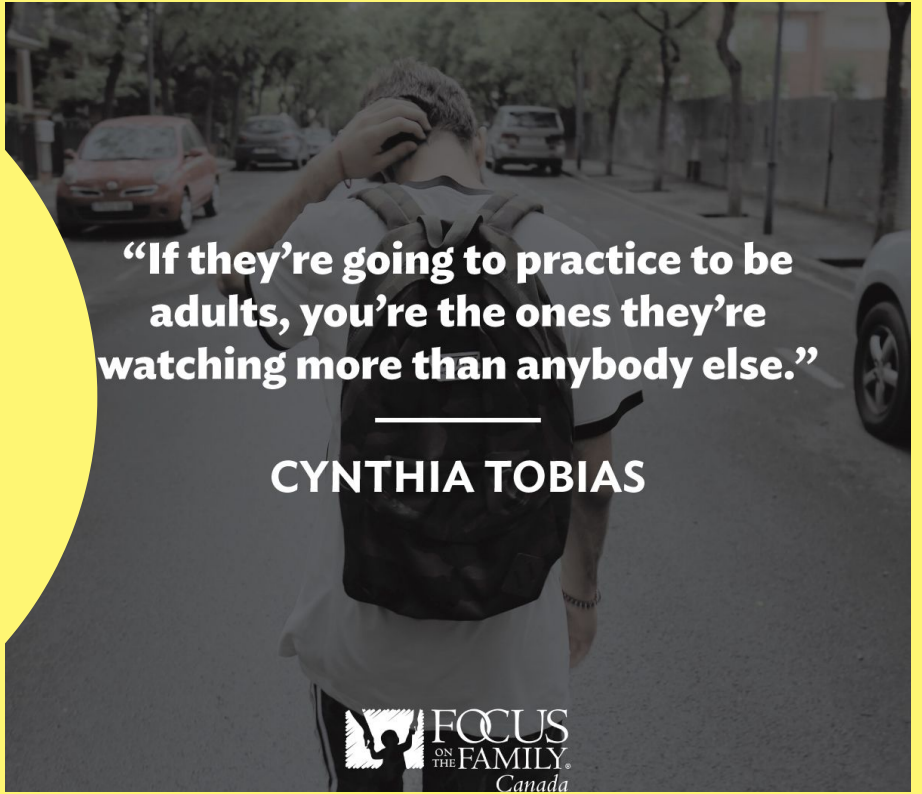


HOW TO HANDLE EMOTIONAL CHANGES

BY DEBORAH SKOLNIK

**“Be the change
that you wish to
see in the world.”
Mahatma Gandhi**



**“If they’re going to practice to be
adults, you’re the ones they’re
watching more than anybody else.”**

CYNTHIA TOBIAS

 **FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY
Canada**

Middle school development involves intense self-awareness: “Kids are suddenly conscious of whether they measure up to other kids in terms of intelligence and athletic ability, and whether they fit in,” says Phyllis Fagell, a licensed clinical professional counselor in Washington, D.C. and author of *Middle School Matters*. Your job? “Explain that everybody feels that sense of not belonging at first,” says Fagell. Share your own stories about navigating this phase, and reassure your child that it gets better.

As your child attempts to find his tribe, don’t be surprised if he breaks away from old friends and gravitates toward new ones. “Kids drift in and out of social circles,” says Srithai. Make your home a hangout-friendly space. You’ll get to monitor your child’s new friendships, which is important since you want to know who’s influencing them, says Srithai. He also recommends encouraging your child to get involved in a club, sport, or community activity to work on social skills and meet new people.

It's horrifying to ponder your child doing any of these things, but "middle-school kids are exposed to more negative social influences than before," Fagell says. Your best strategy is to head off these behaviors by talking about them before they happen. For instance, try saying, "I know it's fun to gossip, but you know what feels even better? Being someone who other people can trust." You'll be letting your child know where you stand, so they can take a stand later on.

Now is when things like competitive sports and social cliques begin; you'll likely find yourself consoling your child for not making a team or not getting a party invite. "Coach your child around the notion they might not always make the cut," advises Srithai. "And emphasize how they can react positively when faced with adversity." Fagell suggests brainstorming together about how your child can move on: "If she didn't make the team, maybe she can do club or rec sports instead. Or if she didn't get invited to the party, maybe she can invite someone for a sleepover."

**It is not what you do for
your children,
but what you have taught
them to do for themselves,
that will make them
successful human beings.**

Ann Landers

Ask how school was, and you'll probably hear "fine." Why is your child not opening up? It's actually a sign of healthy development, says Fagell. "He's looking for you to respect that he needs more privacy and autonomy," she explains. But you don't have to settle for silence.

"Ask open-ended questions," Srithai urges. Try something like "What was your favorite part of the day?" Share details of your own day, too, so the conversation is a two-way street. And carve out a few minutes a day to sit and talk: Chances are you'll get more insight into your middle-schooler's ever-changing, fascinating world."