



*Educating parents.
Enriching families.*

It's My Life - But My Parents Won't Butt Out!

By Lynne Ticknor

Could your good intentions be interfering with your child's development of necessary life skills? Whether prepping kids to get into the "right" school or grooming them to be the next great musical prodigy, well-



meaning but misguided parents are often over-invested in the future success of their child. So, it should be no surprise that excessive parental involvement can also extend to our children's social lives. Growing up is hard enough without parents intervening in one of the few areas that kids can control - their relationships.

By the time children become tweens, they should be ready to start managing their own social lives. That doesn't mean you can't guide them on their interactions, but it does mean that you need to start turning over the reins to them. If you are arranging your child's entire social life - such as play dates, school activities and social gatherings - you may be overstepping your bounds.

So, how do you know when to be involved in your child's social life and when to step aside? Follow these

guidelines.

Be Involved When Your Child Asks

If your child comes to you looking for help or guidance, that's your chance to be involved. Resist the urge to give answers or solve the problem for your child. Instead, ask questions to help your child think through the situation. It may be tempting to take over in an attempt to help them avoid the pain that relationships sometimes cause, but those struggles are a part of the learning process. Ask open-ended questions and try to help her develop a strategy for resolving not only the current issue, but future ones as well.

Be Involved When You Can Calm the Drama

Kids need parents who are stable and remain calm - especially when they themselves cannot. Exploding in anger when you perceive your child has been wronged by another child is counter-productive. It is especially important for parents to remain calm and in control when things seem overwhelming, scary or



Educating parents. Enriching families.®

PEPparent.org

pressure-filled for their kids. Tween relationships aren't easy, and we need to help our kids through the ups and downs of dating.

Here are some strategies for keeping your cool:

- Counting to 10. It's been used for years and is very effective at diffusing feelings. Counting to 10 inserts two important elements of anger management - time and distraction. It gives you a chance to take a step back, separate yourself from the thing that triggered your anger and move forward with more clarity.
- Breathe in to let go. Taking a few deep breaths expands the diaphragm muscle, which expands the lung's air pockets. This invokes a natural relaxation response.
- Use a mantra. Mine is: "I can deal with (name a crisis) with grace and dignity." I say it repeatedly whenever my teen is doing something that is contrary to what I'd like. Your mantra can be whatever makes you feel better. One parent I know says, "I'm as cool as a cucumber" and it makes her feel physically and emotionally cooler.

Step Aside When It's Not About You

Your child's social life should not be the main focus of your time and energy. When we orbit our lives around our children's activities, we are not giving them control over their choices and decisions. And, it gives them the impression that everything is "all about them".

Here are some strategies that can help you maintain a healthy distance:

- Get a life. It sounds flippant, but sometimes our kids' activities and interests become *our* activities and interests. Instead of focusing on your kid's social life, take a look at your own and identify ways you can strengthen your own friendships.
- Stay out of your child's life. Give your child some privacy and let them develop their own friendships and interests. You don't need to know what happened every minute of their day. In fact, if you know every detail about all the drama going on in your tween's or teen's relationships, it's time to step back!
- Focus on the big issues. You are the parent and obviously have the right to know who your child is spending time with, but be judicious in how you exercise that right. You may not think the boy or girl your child is dating is the best choice, but unless the relationship is putting your child at risk, you need to let your child reach that conclusion on his or her own. Setting boundaries is okay, but turning your child's life into a reality show where you're the audience watching every twist and turn is not.

Step Aside with Small Issues

As the saying goes, don't sweat the small stuff. Don't worry about your child's haircut or choice of clothes. Pay attention to the bigger aspects of your child's life like their hopes, dreams, aspirations, disappointments and challenges. Over the past two decades, research has consistently shown that children develop healthier relationships and make better choices when they feel connected to their parents.

Avoid these Top 10 Ways to Embarrass Your Tweens and Teens

Are you looking for the fastest way to build a wedge as large as a crater between you and your child? If so, follow these tips and rest assured your tween/teen will loathe being in your company.

- Forbid it. That's right - forbid your child to do anything and everything that her peers are doing. Don't ask questions. Don't discuss options. Just forbid it! The louder, the better.
- Kiss & go. Require your child to kiss you whenever you drop your child off anywhere. A requisite hug, blown kiss, enthusiastic hand wave or verbal phrase, "I love you, too, Mom!" will have the same result.
- Lick & wipe. Lick your thumb and use it to wipe the remnants of breakfast off the corner of your child's mouth.
- Sing. While driving carpool, sing along to current pop songs. This is especially effective if you don't quite know all the lyrics and/or can't carry a tune.
- Use text slang. When holding a conversation with your child and her friend, use words like LOL, OMG and ROFL. It'll make your tween post "KMN."
- Write lunchbox notes. What was fine in elementary school will be dreaded in middle school, so make sure you tuck a little note in their lunch every day.
- Use pet names. If you called her "Smoochie" or "Baby Cakes" when she was a baby, keep doing it - especially in front of friends and potential boyfriends.
- Display baby pictures. Your child will love it when friends see naked pictures in the bathtub, bunny costumes at Halloween and eating Cheerios in the highchair.
- Make your life all about your child. Everything should revolve around your tween or teen. Your email address should indicate your motherhood (momrules@aol.com) and your social networks should use names like EmilysMommy" or "ILoveMyBabyLilly".
- Volunteer for everything - absolutely everything, including (but not limited to) field trips, school career day, church outings, Boy Scouts, classroom mom, lunch monitor, school fundraisers and, most importantly, dance chaperone.

Lynne Ticknor is the director of education at the Parent Encouragement Program (PEP) in Kensington, MD. She is a certified parent educator and has been teaching parenting classes since 2006. For more information about parenting classes, visit PEPparent.org. Photo credit: Creatista/Bigstock.com