

PARENTING UNFILTERED

Grades, sports, friendships gone sour: When to help your kids and when to keep quiet

By [Kara Baskin](#) Globe Correspondent. Updated November 10, 2023. [1 hour ago](#)



When possible, urge your child to fight their own battles, our experts say. ADOBE/FIZKES - STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Maybe your kid is always benched by a coach who thinks his child is Tom Brady. Or your neighbor's tween — a family you vacation with! — has turned exclusive. When do you speak up? When do you shut up?

I'm not talking about bullying or racism, where your kid's mental or physical health is in danger. I'm talking about awkward gray areas that just make you want to hide. So I assembled a panel of three parenting coaches to tell us what do: Amy Behrens, Margo Porter, and Pam Willsey.

First, scene-setting: Depending on your age, you probably played until dark in the street or were micro-managed by helicopter parents, a term that came into fashion in the early '90s. This was followed by an assortment of other nosy beasts, like snowplow parents.

These days, coaches say, parents are eager not to appear too over-involved — but they're also hyper-engaged and worried about their kids' fragile mental health. Easy access to grades on PowerSchool, social media, a pandemic, and increasing college competitiveness fuel the fear.

"People don't want to be like that, but they feel like they have to. It's so hard to tolerate [your child] feeling uncomfortable," says Porter.

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So, next time your child shows you a photo of everyone hanging out without her or wonders why he's 18th chair in oboe, read this.

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Banish your own teen woes. These scenarios are emotionally charged even if you're an adult. Ask yourself: Is your kid upset, or are you having adolescent flashbacks?

"Parents have to be aware of their own stuff: If you were bullied, if you were benched, if you didn't get a part in the play. You carry some of that old grief. You have to tease out: How upset is my child, actually, about the things I'm upset about?" says Behrens.

Assess your motivations. Crystallize why the scenario is important to confront. Do you really care if your child got cut from lacrosse? Is a C in math the end of the world?

"In the society we live in, if your child isn't a sports or an academic superstar, what's going to happen to them? Are they going to be able to make it to a good college? Everything's so competitive," says Porter. "Parents should peel apart, almost like an onion, their own ideas [versus] what society is pressuring them to do."

Validate. "Remind your children that all feelings are OK. Feelings come and go, and they can't hurt us," says Willsey. "You can say something like: 'I can see that you're feeling very sad that Taylor didn't want to sit with you at lunch. Do you want to tell me more about what happened?'"

Brainstorm. This depends on age, Willsey says. For younger children: "Do you want my help with some ideas for how to handle the situation, or do you just want to share what happened and how you're feeling?"

For teens: "Do you want some help with problem-solving, or do you just want a safe place to vent?"

If your child wants guidance, frame it as an experiment. What's worked well for them in the past? What hasn't worked? What could they try that might work better?

"Get clear on observations, feelings, and specific requests that will help meet their needs. Role-play if they're willing. Possibly visualize the situation having a good outcome. Check in about how it went afterwards," Behrens says.

Normalize disappointment. Your child probably feels shame or embarrassment about whatever's going on, and most kids believe that they're incredibly unique, especially when it comes to their own problems.

"Saying, 'I'm going to get in there and fix it!' isn't really going to help [your child] in the long term. What they really need to learn is how to tolerate a situation and how to deal with things when they don't go the way that they want," says Porter. "Normalize that sometimes this happens. You're in good company."

Talk about when you were cut, benched, shunned, or abandoned at the semiformal, and explain how you overcame it.

Separate your kids' friendships from your own. So many of us bond with other parents through day care or elementary school. This is awesome, until your kids split off. Unless someone is being truly malicious, do not take it personally. Instead, point out the elephant in the room — looks like only one of them loves fencing! — and emphasize why you still value the adult friendship.

"In my mind, when you meet a good friend, that's a treasure," says Porter. "I say, 'I'm so glad we met through our kids.'"

Empower self-advocacy. When possible, urge your child to fight their own battles. Help them craft an email to that impossible science teacher about how to boost a grade. Guide them about how to bring up more playing time with a coach: Could they practice more? Are there specific ways to improve?

This way, not only are they speaking up, they're pressing the other person for factual reasons to explain their behavior. Maybe it will become apparent that they don't have any, and they'll rethink their own rationale.

"Teach your children these skills, because you can't be there for the rest of their life doing it for them," Porter says.

Stay factual. OK, maybe you do want to get involved. Before talking, consider: "What are the non-judgmental facts of the situation, setting feelings aside? Whose perspectives do I need to consider? What information do we need to gather before deciding on a course of action? How old is my child, and what's developmentally appropriate for them in

terms of self-advocacy? What are core values that I want to honor in this situation? What's within my control, and what's outside of my control?," says Behrens.

Use this magic phrase. Instead of becoming accusatory — especially with a longtime friend or a coach you'll see all winter — open with the phrase: "What I'm hearing from my child," says Porter.

"It's a soft way of broaching the subject," she says. This shows that you're open to interpretation and don't think your child is an angel who can do no wrong, which will surely make the other party defensive.

Consider the other person's feelings. Nobody wants to hear criticism about their parenting, coaching, or teaching. Make sure it's a dialogue with a purpose, not a vent session. Agree on a mutually good time to connect. Ask for their perspective. Get clear on what you'd like the outcome to be.

And, maybe most important, "Reflect back what you hear, and ask the other person to reflect back what you've said, if appropriate. 'I'd love to hear what you're taking in about what I'm sharing with you,'" Behrens says.

Then, if the situation warrants it, nail down agreement about next steps: Your child will go to math office hours; both parents will talk to their teens about good social media etiquette.

"Challenging conversations [should] always begin with a connective statement, followed by a brief and clear statement about what happened and how we felt about it. Then, what part we may have played in the situation, and finally, asking for what you want in order to resolve the situation," Willsey says.

Lead with your values. This is especially important in highly charged sports scenarios, where some coaches really are just out to win even if the kids are still learning to play. Think about why you've enrolled your child in a particular sport or activity. Is it to win or to learn? And then ask the leader about their own hopes.

"Say: 'What are your team values? What are you trying to teach the kids? Can you help me understand?,'" Behrens says.

Know the warning signs of real trouble. Sometimes, you do need to intervene.

Look for "increased anxiety and/or depression, substance abuse, behavioral changes in your child or teen (changes in mood, more emotional than usual), sleeping or eating changes, isolating themselves, and/or becoming less interested in activities that had been important previously," Willsey says.

But stay hands-off if possible. "Our generation has redefined what it means to advocate for your child. In previous generations, it was normal for parents to expect their children to fight their own battles," Willsey says.

These days, she likes the term "scaffold parenting."

"We want parents to be there when the kids fall as a safe space to land, while gently encouraging them to try new ways to navigate their challenges," she says.

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