

Reflection

How comfortable do you feel talking about crisis? Why do you think that is?

What worked or didn't work in your conversation?

What is one action step you don't want to forget?

Next Steps

Practical Steps for After the Conversation

- Remember that middle schoolers have some of the most important conversations late at night. So stop by to check in around bedtime and be available if they're ready for a chat.
- While a tragedy can feel all-consuming, it can be healthy to take a break from the processing. Try connecting in a low-stress way, like doing a craft, watching a movie, playing a sport, or going out for ice cream.
- At some point, your middle schooler may need support from someone with specific training. Don't hesitate to reach out to a therapist who specializes in adolescents.



Resources

For additional resources to help you navigate conversations about crisis, check out parentcue.org for the following:

Listen

Parent Cue Live Podcast: Episode 65
How to Recognize When Your Kid is in Crisis

Download

Preparing For the Unexpected Worksheets

Learn

Parenting With Mental Health in Mind Course

Read

4 Ways to Maintain Mental and Emotional Wellness During a Crisis
Article by Dr. Chinwé Williams

Find a Therapist
who specializes in middle schoolers in crisis at goodtherapy.org or psychologytoday.com

Conversation Guide

For Parents

Crisis

Middle School



64% of kids experience a crisis-event (known as an Adverse Childhood Event or ACE), many of which occur during or before middle school years.¹

Why is it important to talk with your middle schooler about crisis?

If you've spent much time with a middle schooler, you know that even normal, everyday experiences can feel, well, dramatic. Big (and oftentimes new) emotions can be challenging to manage during this phase, but an emotional moment is different than a true crisis situation. For a middle schooler, crisis may look more like the loss of a family member, a change in living arrangements, sexual or physical abuse, being bullied, changing schools or even a normal developmental change (like puberty) that just feels really scary. By definition, a crisis is a real or perceived threat that disrupts your child's

normal degree of functioning (e.g., physically, emotionally, and/or mentally), thereby requiring an immediate response and support from you.

And while it's difficult to think about crisis at such a young age, research tells us nearly 64% of kids experience a crisis-event (known as an Adverse Childhood Event or ACE), many of which occur during or before middle school years.¹

While we can't prevent all negative experiences, as parents, our job is to help our kids feel as safe, in control, connected, and valued as possible when we navigate difficult events. The more support we can gather around our middle schoolers (like coaches, teachers, church leaders, or other trusted adults), the more likely they will heal and thrive when bad things happen.

¹ Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC
² Williams, C., & Hutcherson, W. (2020). *Seen: Healing Despair in kids and teenagers through the power of connection*. Orange Books.

Tips to Help Middle Schoolers Navigate Crisis

When to Have the Conversation

Whether it's dealing with a personal tragedy like family loss, saying goodbye to a beloved pet, or facing their own addiction or mental health challenges, it can be obvious when a middle schooler is in crisis *individually*. Still, many teenagers experience a kind of second-hand trauma from crises they didn't experience personally—like a school shooting in another city, violence reported in the news, or wars and global crises.

Even when you aren't aware of anything specific going on in your middle schooler's life, pay close attention to clues like altered eating habits, sleeping too much or too little, talk of self-harm, or a loss of interest in things they once enjoyed. If you sense your middle

schooler is struggling, it's always appropriate to contact their pediatrician, a trusted school counselor, or a family therapist.

Before the Conversation

1. Understand this phase: Your role during this phase is to affirm their personal journey.

In middle school, kids think like engineers. That means they are trying to combine ideas like building blocks to understand how the world works. So when something difficult or painful happens, they may want specific information, or they may ask questions about why or how it happened. Remember to keep details age-appropriate and be mindful to not over-share.

Because middle schoolers are still in a very self-focused phase of development, your role is to affirm their personal journey. So even if the event or the loss doesn't feel like a big deal to you, take it seriously. Listen as they name their emotions and remind them that they are loved, valuable, and safe no matter what.

2. Sit with this question: What is my end goal for this conversation?

When middle schoolers ask big questions, it can be tempting to try to have all the answers. Remember it's ok not to know how or why something happened. You can always say, "I don't know, but I will be here for you as you process this."

As a parent, the bullseye for you is connection and support. In fact, parents and caregivers have the unique ability to have a significant impact on anxiety and despair simply by offering connection. And you are uniquely positioned to notice your child's needs and find the support of other caring, trusted (and sometimes professionally trained) adults.

Think About This

1. What do you want your kid to know?

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2. What phrase or sentence do you **most** want them to hear?

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3. Who is a safe person you can call before and/or after the conversation to say all the things you shouldn't say to your middle schooler?

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Tips to Having the Conversation

Middle schoolers may feel awkward talking face-to-face. Try talking while doing something else, like going for a walk, playing basketball, or baking.

Developing brains mean middle schoolers are experiencing new emotions and may not have the emotional vocabulary to talk about how they feel. Try looking at a feelings wheel and helping them identify specific emotions.

While it's tempting, resist the urge to move too quickly to positive news or "everything will be okay." Your middle schooler needs to acknowledge their pain before moving on too quickly.

At this phase, it's difficult for a middle schooler to imagine life will ever look or feel different than it does right now.

Offer perspective by saying something like, "Even though this hurts, you can heal." Or, "Even though the situation won't change, there will be good days in the future."

Your middle schooler needs to hear that this isn't the end of their story. Say something like, "I know you have what it takes to get through this," and remind them you'll be with them the whole way.

Get the Conversation Started

"You are not alone."

"I'm here when you're ready to talk."

"What was that like? How did you feel?"

"This seems really hard. How are you doing?"

"You will not always feel this way."

"What can I do to help?"

"You have what it takes to get through this."

"Who else can you talk to about this?"

"I don't know why this happened but I'm here for you."

"Let's make a plan for what's next."