

Should parents get involved in their children's issues? Here's some expert advice on common situations, so you'll know when to meddle and when to stay mum.



1. Your child has an unreasonable amount of homework.

Should you intervene? Not until you've done some serious reconnaissance work.

"Make sure your child is legitimately spending time working," not playing with the dog or daydreaming, says Jan Busey, an elementary-school teacher for nine years in Asheville, North Carolina. If that's not the case, make an appointment with the teacher.

How to handle it: Come prepared. Before the meeting, keep track of your child's progress.

"Set goals for your child to complete an assignment, then assess at the end of that time," says Busey. "And write down specific challenges. The more you can show that you've tried to deal with the issue at home, the more receptive a teacher will be to your concerns."

When to reconsider: If your help in organizing tasks seems to speed things up and ease stress, the answer may be structure, not a teacher conference.

2. Another adult lectures your child.

Should you intervene? If the conversation is an attempt to keep your child safe (he's climbing up the slide the wrong way), let the other parent finish.

How to handle it: Be present and reinforce what the parent was saying so your child understands that it's not OK with you, either.

"Stopping others from disciplining your child lets him think he can behave badly when out of your sight," says etiquette authority Jodi R. R. Smith.

When to reconsider: If the adult is speaking to your child more strongly than is necessary, you can politely cut him off. "Introduce yourself as the parent, then say that you'll take it from there," says Stacy DeBroff, author of "The Mom Book."

3. Your child didn't get invited to a big birthday party.

Should you Intervene? No. Making an issue about the slight will probably make things worse and draw attention to the fact that your child was left out.

How to handle it: Instead, focus on comforting your child and planning something fun as a diversion on the big day. Down the road, if this happens more than once, consider enrolling your child in a class or a program outside of school.

"He'll meet a new group of kids who share his interests," says Michele Borba, an educational psychologist in Palm Springs, California, and the author of "The Big Book of Parenting Solutions."

When to reconsider: You may want to talk to the teacher -- not the other child's parent -- to make sure there's not a larger issue between your child and the birthday boy. "Ask if there is some tension between this child and yours," says DeBroff. "If you find out that your child did do something mean, use this opportunity to show how his actions affect others."

4. Another kid is bullying your child on the playground.

Should you intervene? Not immediately, unless your child's safety is at stake. "If you're there, watch closely and give your child a chance to solve the problem on her own," says DeBroff.

The same goes for school: It's better first to equip your child with skills to stay safe and empower her to resolve the situation on her own.

How to handle it: Rehearse ways for your child to respond. For example, if your child has a sense of humor, she can use a retort like "No, I'm not a baby, but thanks for asking," spoken in an assertive tone of voice. Otherwise, she can employ a strong "Cut it out" before walking away.

"Have her practice standing up straight, chest out, like she's wearing a bulletproof vest that taunts bounce right off of," says Borba.

When to reconsider: If the bullying persists and your child feels threatened, get involved. If you are the one intervening on the playground, nonchalantly pull your child out of the situation (snack time!) before discussing it. Talking to her in front of the bully could be more embarrassing.

If the bullying is at school, ask a teacher to keep an eye out. Most schools take bullying seriously -- 39 states have laws addressing it -- so teachers should have practices in place.

5. A teacher gave your child a C, but he thinks he deserved an A.

Should you intervene? Intervene only if your child will take part in the conversation with the teacher. "If you believe your child's points are valid, say you'll make an appointment with the teacher but that he'll have to make the case," says Busey.

How to handle it: Have your child ask the teacher why she gave him the grade she did. "Hearing the feedback from the teacher will help him fine-tune future assignments," says Busey. Helping your child line up his arguments beforehand is a great way to teach him how to constructively approach a disagreement.

When to reconsider: If your child is prone to misreading or incorrectly copying down instructions, make sure you have the whole story before you jump to conclusions. A stellar report on blue whales is less so if the task was to write about smaller mammals of the sea.

Moms (and dads) gone wild

Teachers tell stories of parents taking things too far.

- "I had one sixth-grade parent who would e-mail me the night before tests, asking for a copy of the test to 'help' her child."

- "One mother brought her child to school late every Friday so she would conveniently miss the math flash-card tests, which made the girl nervous."
- "A parent changed the relay order for a swim meet on my computer while I was out coaching. She wanted her kid to swim backstroke, not butterfly."
- "One father called me after an uninvited child showed up at his daughter's slumber party, asking me to penalize the student. I told him teachers don't police slumber parties."

6. Your child learned a not-so-nice word from a classmate.

Should you intervene? No. Tracking down the perpetrator's mother takes more effort than it's worth.

How to handle it: Just because you aren't trying to root out the foulmouthed preschooler doesn't mean you let the behavior slide.

"I was actually glad when my children used those words -- at home, anyway," says Busey. "It gave me the chance to explain what they mean and how they make other people feel."

When to reconsider: If the bad word isn't a onetime thing and playing with a certain child always results in rule breaking. If your darling is also watching R-rated movies or playing violent video games at a friend's house, it's time to talk with the parents.

Give them the benefit of the doubt; they may be in the dark about little Dirty Harry. Ask that they keep tabs on the activities; otherwise plan to host the kids at your house