

---

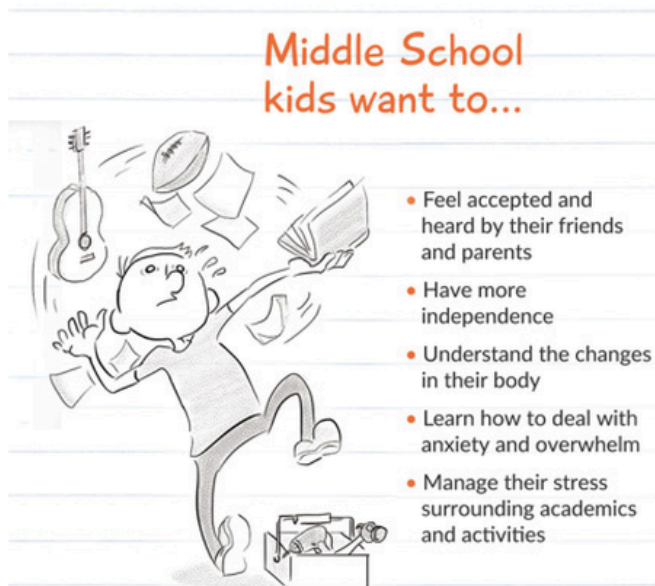
# Connect With Your Kids - Moving Beyond “I’m Fine”

**Heather Hetchler, MA**

---

Middle School aged kids are undergoing changes physically, mentally and emotionally and they need to learn how to cope with the

changes inside of them as well as the new more independent world they are navigating. We are all wired to belong and there is a difference between belonging and fitting in. Kids need to develop their self and be okay with who they are not become who they think their peers want them to be and parents play a HUGE role in this.



*“Fitting in is accessing and acclimating. Belonging is being true to yourself first... it doesn’t require you to change who you are. It requires you to be who you are and that’s vulnerable.” - Brene’ Brown.*

## **5 Tips for Connecting With Your Kids Beyond I’m Fine:**

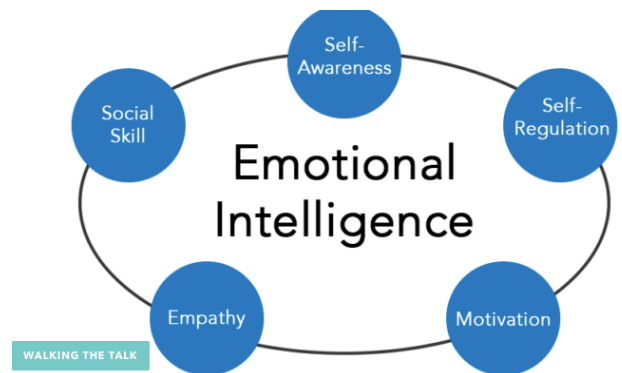
- **Go shoulder to shoulder with them** - Do activities with your kids. Cook, go for a walk, ride bikes, play board games, go kayaking, retro drive-in movies. Find something special to do with each child that gets them talking, creates a safe environment and fosters connecting with you.
- **The Lightbox** - Pick up a light box for you and your student or another “creative” board. Write encouraging words on yours each day. See what happens with theirs.
- **Live out what you speak into them.** - You can give kids the best advice in the world but if your actions contradict your words, they are more likely to follow what you do than what you tell them to do. Put your phone down. Pick up more time with them. Have family unplugged time.
- **Write it Out** - Leave notes for your kids. Start a journal of questions to pass back and forth. Put post it notes on their mirror in the am, on their cereal box, on their pillow. Get creative.
- **Become a blessings detective** - Look for the good and point it out. It’s also okay to check their devices periodically. If you get a sense something isn’t right, trust your gut and often if you “see something” you can get your kid talking without demanding they tell you about what you saw.

*“If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.” - Benjamin Franklin*

---

## 5 Elements of EI:

1. Self-awareness - The ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions and drives, as well as their effect on others. Hallmarks include self-confidence, realistic self-assessment and a self-deprecating sense of humor.
2. Self-regulation - The ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods along with the ability to suspend judgement . . . to respond rather than react . . . to think before acting. Hallmarks include trustworthiness and integrity, comfort with ambiguity, and an openness to change.
3. Motivation - A passion to work for reasons going beyond money or status. A propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence. Hallmarks include a strong drive to achieve, optimism, even in the face of failure, and organizational commitment.
4. Empathy - The ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people. A skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions. Hallmarks include expertise in building and retaining talent, cross-cultural sensitivity, and service to clients and customers.
5. Social skill - A proficiency in managing relationships and building networks. An ability to find common ground and build rapport. Hallmarks include effectiveness in leading change, persuasiveness, and expertise in building and leading teams. ([ahaparenting.com](http://ahaparenting.com))



### What parents can do to help nurture EI in their middle schoolers:

- **Acknowledge your child's perspective/listen and empathize.** - You don't have to agree with how they are feeling to validate their emotions. We are entitled to our emotions, it's how we act in them. *"I can see this is really tough on you..."* This creates a safety net and teaches empathy.
- **Don't rescue from failure/pain** - teach your child how to cope with pain and failure but don't rescue them from this important life lesson. Sit with them through the hurt but don't shield them from it. Refrain from blaming others when your child doesn't make a team or grade.
- **Teach, set and enforce boundaries** - teaching kids how to set and enforce boundaries is important and they learn when they have them. *"If you are going to yell at me, I'm going to stop what I'm doing and leave the room. Stopping means I won't be driving you to baseball practice."*
- **Teach problem solving/lead by example** - while we may want our kids to "get thick skin" telling them to do that (and not process the hurt) may make them clam up. Emotions are indicators not dictators and they tell us how we are feeling but not how we should act.
- **Play it out/share your tough days & strategies** - role play with your kids. Also, tell them if you've had a tough day. You do not share the details of adult struggles with kids but you can say your boss was tough on you or a friend hurt your feelings and then share what healthy steps you took to process. *"I had a co-worker say something mean to me so I took five minutes at lunch and went for a walk (or journaled) and while it still hurt, I feel so much better."*
- **Give them chores** - responsibility is GOOD for middle schoolers. They should contribute to the family. Set a boundary around a chore so you aren't asking all the time. "No phone until the trash is taken out or the kitchen is swept." In the summer, "you can watch tv after your chores are done."