



## Parents play a big role in preventing bullying by modeling proper behavior and talking to their children about how to act with peers

Cropped Johnson family pic for posting.jpg

Geraldine Johnson often uses role-playing exercises to help her 10-year-old daughter, Trinity, practice ways of handling different social situations. *(Courtesy of the Johnson family)*

**Karren L. Johnson | Special to PennLive** By **Karren L. Johnson | Special to PennLive**

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"As parents we are surrounded by teachable moments, we just need to make the most of them," said Geraldine Johnson, mom and anti-bullying trainer

Ten-year-old Trinity Johnson of North Middleton Township already has quite a few good habits — from taking care of her pets to reading and brushing her teeth. But the one she takes the most pride in is doing something kind at least once a day for someone else.

"I like doing nice things," said the soon-to-be fifth grader at Crestview Elementary School. "One time I stood up for a friend who was being bullied, another time I shared my seat with someone who didn't have a chair and I helped a girl learn how to draw cats."

In addition to making someone smile, Trinity said that her favorite part is coming home and sharing her good deeds with her mom, a tradition that began as soon as she could talk.

"Every night my mom asks me questions about my day including a nice thing I did and then I ask her the same questions," Trinity said. "It's a lot of fun."

As a Certified **Olweus Bullying Prevention** Trainer for **Cumberland Valley School District** in Mechanicsburg, Trinity's mother, Geraldine Johnson, firmly believes that just as important as it is for parents to protect their children from bullying, it's equally important to talk to them about good behavior and being kind to others.

"As parents we are surrounded by teachable moments, we just need to make the most of them," Johnson said.

From keeping lines of communication open with children to teaching by example, the following tips can help parents promote positive behavior.

### **Set clear expectations**

It's nearly impossible to go anywhere today without seeing or hearing the term "bullying." Still, parents shouldn't assume children know how to recognize it or what proper behavior is.

"Most kids associate bullying with hitting or name-calling, but they don't always realize it can also include gossiping, excluding others and spreading rumors," said Stacie Molnar-Main, a Bullying Prevention Expert and Strategic Initiatives Manager at the Center for **Safe Schools** in Camp Hill.

"I teach my daughter to recognize that if someone is mean once, it might not be bullying until it becomes purposeful and

repetitive.”

According to Molnar-Main, it’s never too early to provide children with a clear understanding of how they should or shouldn’t be treating others. Children who bully typically don’t seem to care about others feelings, so enforcing empathy, respect and compassion from an early age is key.

“Establishing rules and meaningful consequences for bullying behavior will let your child know that purposefully being mean to others is not OK and that it will not be accepted,” Molnar-Main said.

At the same time, when your child handles conflict well, shows compassion for others, or finds a positive way to deal with feelings they should be praised.

### **Be attentive and involved**

Take the time to really talk to your child in order to gain insight into their friendships, any problems at school and how they respond to various social situations, said Johnson.

“I learn so much about my daughter from our nightly chats,” she said. “In addition to asking her about something nice she did, I also always ask about her favorite part of the day, something that she didn’t like and what she is looking forward to the next day. Over the years we’ve also added more creative questions to ask each other.”

Establishing these sorts of planned conversations between you and your child at a young age will make them much more likely to continue sharing as they get older, Johnson said.

“Be present at school events or pick a random day to stop by and pick your child up from school,” said **Cheryl Dellasega**, a professor in Penn State College of Medicine’s Department of Humanities. “Watch them interact with their peers, get to know their friends’ parents and ask teachers to describe them.”

### **Model good behavior**

“A great way for parents to help children resolve conflict, deal with feelings such as anger, insecurity or frustration, and treat others with kindness is to model positive behavior themselves,” said **Jamie Bolton**, a licensed psychologist with a private practice in East Pennsboro Township.

Kids who live with yelling, name-calling, harsh criticism or physical anger from a sibling, parent or caregiver may act out similar behavior in other settings, she said.

“Rather than respond negatively to something that happened at work or between friends, parents can use the situation as a teachable moment,” Dellasega said. “For example, if a coworker was being rude to someone in a meeting, ask your child how they would have handled the situation.”

Role playing provides a great way for children to build problem solving skills, said Johnson, who will often use a bullying scenario from her daughter’s favorite TV show, book or life in order to come up with different options for handling the situation.

“Some options might be wrong, but the idea is to teach her how to pick the right one,” Johnson added.

Parents can also use role playing as an opportunity to demonstrate the important role bystanders can play, Bolton said. As the people who see bullying when it happens bystanders are in the most powerful position.

"Explain to children that as bystanders they have a voice and the power to stop bullying behavior," Bolton said. "It only takes one person to stand up and others will follow.

### **Seek out support and resources**

Parents play a significant role in preventing bullying behavior, but they certainly shouldn't feel alone in their efforts. Your child's pediatrician, teachers and school guidance counselor are all excellent resources. In fact, many school districts such as Cumberland Valley have introduced bullying prevention programs into their curriculum.

To help young girls build healthy relationship skills, Dellasega founded **Club Ophelia** and Camp Ophelia, an after-school program and summer camp for girls that uses arts and crafts projects, role playing and team building activities to encourage positive behavior.

As the mother of two daughters Katelyn, age 14, and Olivia, age 11, Yvonne Sharrow of East Hanover Township is no stranger to the drama that can take place among young girls. Getting her daughters involved in both Ophelia programs has been a huge blessing, she said.

"I've had the opportunity to watch Katelyn grow and become comfortable in her own skin," Sharrow said. "I'm seeing Olivia become a positive role model to her peers by implementing lessons she learned at Club Ophelia in order to diffuse situations without them turning into a huge mountain."

If your school doesn't offer a Club Ophelia program or other bullying prevention program, talk to your guidance counselor about getting something started.

"As parents we don't always have the answer so it's nice when the school and the parents can work together to reinforce positive behavior," Sharrow said.

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