

life

Ask Professor Tanya Byron

My teenage son is so mean to his younger sister

Q I have a 15-year-old son and a 13-year-old daughter. My son has found school difficult throughout his life, struggling to fit in and find his place. He is highly intelligent and musically gifted, but struggles with team sport and laddering around. He lacks empathy and can be unemotional. He is, of course, going through puberty, but he has always been like this. When he smiles and tells a joke it is a revelation. He has a lovely smile, but he rarely shows it.

His sister, on the other hand, is full of beans, sporty, fun, smiles a lot and is a joy to behold. My son has always been jealous of her and finds her annoying. She is picky with food, and at dinner my son always speaks to her about having left something on her plate. I tell him that it is not his concern. If he talks to her, it is usually something critical about her choice in music or films. We have talked to him about this, but nothing changes his behaviour. I know some of his traits could be considered to be on the autistic scale, but I wondered whether there was a way to talk him round and make him see that if he pushes his sister away he'll regret it.

My mum says I should take away his phone each time he is mean. I'm not sure if he is too old for that, but maybe she's right. He doesn't seem to care; he just plays his guitar instead. It makes me so sad to see them not getting on. I had an older brother and we were good friends around this age. It also upsets my daughter that he's so mean.

Sarah

A This description of your son points to mixed feelings. As a mother, I understand that you must feel for him because he seems a vulnerable boy who hasn't found his place within his peer group, lacks some

fundamental social skills and struggles with envy as he sees his sister manage life easily. On the flip side, he is being unpleasant in a manner that his sister finds cruel: he ignores and criticises her. It is this side of him, I suspect, that your mother sees and encourages you to take a firmer stance when you see him being a bully.

To begin, I agree with your mother. If there are no clear consequences for your son's nasty behaviour, in effect you are sanctioning it. He may be very bright. He may sometimes make you feel great relief when he smiles and cracks a joke, but if you don't find a way to enable him to understand that he cannot behave like this with his sister, how will he learn to understand relationships and manage feelings such as love/hate, respect/envy, joy/sadness and calm/anxiety?

Taking this farther, I would say that if his rudeness towards his sister is not robustly dealt with so that he learns that it is unkind and unacceptable, how will he view women as an adult? Will he believe that he has the right to belittle and bully women? Will he spend his life blaming his sister and her success for his inability to find happiness?

You mention that his traits "could be considered to be on the autistic scale", which I presume are his lack of empathy and his difficulty with social communication. I wonder if this adds to your ambivalence about taking a firm and consistent stance with him when he behaves badly. You may feel sorry for him and perhaps wonder whether he can't help himself. While this comes from maternal

protectiveness, I don't think it will help your son or daughter. You risk that she will one day resent your lack of a firm stance. By feeling sorry for him you may also be denying him the opportunity to learn how to be the best version of himself and how to create meaningful relationships.

Talking to him obviously isn't enough. My advice is that you make it clear to him that his behaviour towards his sister is unacceptable, unjustifiable and makes him a bully. Then, as your mother suggests, push the point home by removing what gives him pleasure — his phone or guitar — so he can see that you have had enough. I also suggest that if you don't do this, one day someone else less loving might push the point home.

There are, however, drivers to his behaviour and these must be acknowledged and addressed. Bullies bully because they feel inadequate. They dominate because they feel small. The other parental task is to enable your son to find confidence and develop the ability to form friendships. This starts with a discussion that might prove tricky with a 15-year-old who has never been good at communicating and who, in the face of your more assertive stance when he is nasty to his sister, feels annoyed with you.

It would be useful for his school head of year to be aware of him finding school difficult. They should make sure he isn't being bullied and explore ways that he can be supported via teachers he connects with and clubs that he

could join. The school counsellor might also be usefully involved. It might be worth looking at groups and activities, perhaps based around his musical talents, outside school so that he can develop other social networks. The point would be to enable your son to not only "find his place", but also begin to develop a skills-based view of himself rather than a deficit view that his sister unwittingly triggers and is put down for.

He may benefit from seeing a therapist who specialises in teenagers

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with social and emotional difficulties. It is not unusual that high-IQ and gifted children and young people can struggle with peer relationships (see Potential Plus UK's advice at bit.ly/2DKqwrK). Therapy would enable your son to learn to articulate what he struggles with and to develop emotional, psychological and social skills to manage those feelings.

A good place to look would be welldoing.org, an excellent resource that enables accredited therapists to be found based on an analysis of need via questionnaires. The therapists can also work online for those who find face-to-face work challenging, which is useful for teenagers with social difficulties. Finally, you might consider a family therapist, who would enable a more joined-up family conversation. This would give everyone a space to express their feelings and work towards greater empathy and the development of stronger sibling bonds. **If you would like Professor Tanya Byron's help, email profstantabyron@thetimes.co.uk**



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