

Letters

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The greatest battles children fight are carried quietly in their hearts

At the heart of every child's school experience is a deep desire to belong. Children want to be seen, accepted, and included. They want to feel that they matter within their peer groups. Yet, this sense of belonging is not always guaranteed.

The beginning of a new term often brings subtle but significant shifts. Friendships that once felt secure may change. New alliances are formed, while others quietly fade. For some children, this transition is smooth. For others, it is confusing and painful.

A child who returns to school expecting familiarity may instead find distance. A close friend may no longer be as available. A group they once identified with may have moved on. These experiences, though rarely discussed, can leave a child feeling uncertain and alone. That is why you need to keep in touch with your child to ascertain their social well-being within their community.

Within the school environment, social hierarchies often emerge. These are informal structures that determine who is "popular," who is "accepted," and who is left on the margins. Children quickly become aware of these dynamics. For some, this pressure leads to conformity. For others, it results in withdrawal.

Not all social struggles are loud or obvious. In fact, some of the most painful experiences children face are subtle.

Exclusion does not always come in the form of direct rejection. It can be seen in small, repeated moments, such as being left out of conversations, ignored in group activities, or overlooked in friendships. Over time, these experiences accumulate and shape how a child sees themselves.

Without the right support, such experiences can lead to sadness, low self-esteem, and a diminished sense of belonging.

When we think about bullying, we often imagine overt aggression like fighting, name-calling, or confrontation. While these forms exist, many children experience more forms of intimidation that are harder to detect. This may include sarcasm, exclusion, spreading rumours, or persistent ridicule disguised as jokes.

For the child on the receiving end, the impact can be just as damaging.

Many children do not report such experiences. Some lack the language to describe what they are going through. As a result, they internalize their experiences, carrying emotional burdens in silence, and this has increased mental health issues in Uganda.

In many cases, children choose silence as a way of coping. They tell their parents that everything is fine. This silence is not always a sign that all is well. Sometimes, it is a protective shield.

Children may feel that speaking up will not change anything, or they may worry about making their situation worse.

One of the most important roles parents can play is to create an environment where children feel safe to share their social experiences. This goes beyond asking routine questions about school. It involves intentional patient engagement. Children need to sense that they can speak openly without fear of judgment, dismissal, or immediate correction. When parents listen attentively and respond with empathy, children are more likely to open up.

Parents cannot control the social environment of school, but they can equip their children to navigate it. This includes affirming their worth beyond peer approval, helping them develop confidence in who they are, and encouraging them to build healthy friendships.

It also involves guiding them on how to respond to difficult situations with courage and wisdom. Most importantly, children need to know that they are not alone. That even when they face challenges at school, they have a place of security and understanding with a parent, and at home.

As the term progresses, much attention will be given to academic progress. Test scores will be discussed, and performance will be evaluated. But alongside these metrics, there is another dimension that deserves equal attention—the social and emotional experiences of the child.

School is not just a place where children learn subjects. It is where they learn about themselves, about others, and about where they fit in the world. As parents and caregivers, we must look beyond books and grades.

We must pay attention to the social realities our children face, even as the term is almost closing soon. The greatest battles children fight are not written in their exercise books, but carried quietly in their hearts.