



Navigating the Middle Years

The tween years can have their challenges, but they also have their joys! These tips will help you steer your way through the middle grades with success—and enjoyment—for both you and your middle grader.



Connect with your tween

Getting your child to communicate with you may just be a matter of finding the right time and place. Try a different setting, such as in the car on the way to soccer practice or while taking a walk around the block. He may open up more than he would if you were just staring at each other. Also, listen for openings that he gives you. If he mentions a topic he's interested in or brings up something funny that happened in school, be ready to listen and follow his lead.



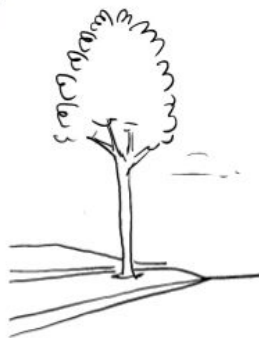
casm or negative language, and she'll be more likely to respond in kind. A good rule of thumb: Don't say anything you wouldn't want someone else to say to her.

Think before you speak

Your middle grader missed the bus for the second time this week, and you have to drive him to school again! Before bringing up a topic that makes you angry, use strategies to calm down, such as breathing deeply or simply waiting

Model respect

Set the stage for better interactions—and a better relationship—by treating your tween with respect. When you chat, put away distractions like your phone, and look her in the eye. Speak nicely, avoiding sar-



a few minutes. Then, start the conversation on a positive note by saying something like, "You know I love you no matter what. Here's what we need to work on..." Your discussion will be more peaceful and productive if he feels loved and understood from the beginning.

Agree on guidelines

Make a plan to ensure civil discussions with your tween. For instance, you might say that each person should be able to speak without being interrupted. Or set ground rules about no put-downs or yelling. Also, try to use *I* messages so no one feels attacked. You could say to her, "I feel worried when you don't come straight home from school," instead of "You never follow my rules!" Then, to avoid recycling old fights, only bring up past issues if they relate to the matter at hand.

Listen to problems

When your child is faced with a challenge, such as an argument with a friend, try to avoid jumping right in with your opinion. Instead, ask how he thinks he should handle the situation. If he needs help, share how you dealt with a similar issue (perhaps you asked a mutual friend for help in making up). You'll give your middle grader valuable problem-solving practice, and you'll reduce the chances that he'll get defensive.





Compromise wisely

If you find yourselves at odds, remember this: It might be possible for you both to get what you want. In fact, you'll help your tween develop conflict-resolution skills by negotiating solutions. Say she wants to sleep at a friend's house, but you want her to get a good night's rest for her game the next day. You might suggest that she go to her friend's for a while but come home to sleep. Or she may ask if her friend can sleep over at your house instead, and you could make sure they get to bed on time. Encourage her to listen to your suggestions with an open mind, and you do the same for her.



Notice good behavior

Middle graders still aim to please you—especially if they feel appreciated. Recognize good deeds with a high five, a “Way to go!” or a sincere thank-you. Consider giving an extra privilege from time to time. For instance, if your child volunteers to help a younger sibling with homework or cleans the family room without being asked, you might let him choose your weekend family activity or pick the film for movie night.

Put it in writing

Making your expectations clear will put you and your middle grader on the same page. Together, make a list of household rules covering safety (drugs, Internet use), school (attendance, homework), and family life (chores, meals). Then lay out consequences for breaking rules (grounding, loss of phone privileges). *Tip:* Having fewer rules makes them easier for your child to remember—and for you to enforce—so try sticking to the ones that matter most (“Finish homework before playing video games”). If she argues, simply point to the rule and walk away. She'll get the message, and you won't invite a fight.



Choose your battles

Along with your child's desire for more independence comes a need to control her own environment. Try to decide what's most important to you. Maybe you can overlook a messy room or loud music, but you probably want to put your foot down about school attendance or dating. Letting the “little stuff” go will give her small victories that will mean a lot to her.



Find opportunity in mistakes

Every mistake can be an important learning opportunity. If your middle grader is upset because he didn't spend enough time studying for a big math test and got a poor grade, encourage him to come up with a plan for next time. He might set up a calendar and organize study guides. Let him know there will be more chances to do well—and that you're proud of him for thinking ahead.

Take care of yourself

Calm, happy parents tend to have calmer, happier kids. Think of ways to relax when parenting your middle grader becomes stressful. For example, you might read a book or take a bath. It's also helpful to chat with friends who are parents of tweens and share tips on handling parenting situations. You will feel better knowing you're not alone—and you may even find solutions you hadn't thought of!