

Tips For Parents of Middle Schoolers

The first tip is thinking ahead... One of our best tools as parents is being prepared. As your son or daughter gets to the middle school years, get ready for at least occasional conflicts. Think through what is truly important to you. Is the youngster's hairstyle as important as homework? Isn't curfew more of a concern than crabbiness? Obviously, dawdling is a lot easier to accept than drugs. As these give-and-take situations start, know ahead of time what areas you are willing to negotiate and what areas are absolutes.

Break down big chores into small parts. Sometimes young people feel overwhelmed by tasks, especially those they've let go for a long time. A disastrous bedroom, twenty-three overdue math assignments, a long-term project that's "suddenly" due in a few days (or hours!); all of these cause the preadolescent to choose to give up rather than get started.

Help your child by setting up smaller goals: clean off your bed; get five assignments done tonight; assemble the materials for the project. Preadolescents have trouble structuring tasks so that they are more approachable. In an even and off-hand way, we can help them in this.

Encourage your middle schooler to keep a daily list (weekly is too much) with a few things on it to be done that day. It may be necessary to assign a specific time to each task. When the task is completed, draw a line through it to show accomplishment.

Don't hesitate to remind your middle schooler about appointments and due dates. Try to think ahead about materials required for a project (unless you look forward to late-evening visits to K-Mart). This will not last forever. When this same child was learning to walk, we held his or her hands and made the path smooth. Now he or she is learning to take on a tremendous assortment of life-tasks and changes; hand-holding (but not the firm, physical grip previously necessary) is needed for about a year or so as your middle schooler gets started on the road to being a responsible adult.

Be willing to listen — but don't poke or pry. Kids this age value independence and often seem secretive. Keeping to themselves is part of the separateness they are trying to create. Let them know you'd love to help them, but don't push them into a defensive position.

If your child is in the midst of a longtime friendship that is falling apart, the best thing you can do is stand by and be a good listener. It is devastating for us to see our children hurting, but taking sides or intervening is not appropriate, nor will it help. Preadolescents do survive these hurts, especially if they know we are there to listen to their pain.

Friends are people who accept us as we are. They listen, they don't needlessly criticize, they back us up when we're right and pick us up when we're down. Be a friend to your middle schooler; some days kids feel you're the only one they have.

All friendships have ups and downs. Children need to learn that being "best friends" isn't always smooth sailing. People have differences of opinion and even get angry, but they still care for each other. This is what's going on when we get involved in those "I-hate-her-she-is-so-stuck-up-and-how-could-she-do-this-to-me" conversations. As parents we must help our kids see that one problem doesn't ruin a relationship, but stubbornness might. Middle schoolers have a lot of spats and falling outs, but often the friends are back together again in a short time.

When reprimanding, deal only with the precise problem, don't bring in other issues. "The trash is still here, and I want it out, now," is better than, "You are so lazy! I told you to take that trash out two hours ago and it's still here! You'd live in a pigsty, wouldn't you? Well, you aren't the only one in this house, you know..."

If the issue is minor, keep things light. The shoes on the floor, the wet towel on the bed, the carton left open; these are maddening, perhaps, but not earth-shattering. Call attention to them in a humorous way, so your middle-schooler knows you want action but you aren't being punitive. "Either the cat's smarter than I thought or you left the milk carton open on the counter. One of you please put it back before it spoils."

Don't use power unless it's urgent. Parents have the ultimate power, and kids know it. We don't have to "prove" it to them at every turn. Save your strength for those really important issues you've decided are non-negotiable. Eventually kids are going to possess power of their own, and we want them to be able to use it wisely.

National Middle School Association

What Can Parents Do if Their Children are Being Bullied?

1. Ask the child directly. Often children do not wish to tell their parents due to shame and embarrassment, or fear that bullies will retaliate if they tell. Look for signs such as: fear of going to school, lack of friends, missing belongings and torn clothing, and increased fearfulness and anxiety.
2. Work with the school immediately to make sure your child is safe, that effective consequences are applied toward the bully, and that monitoring at school is adequate. Advocate for involvement of the bully's parents. If the bullying is happening on the way to and from school, arrange for the child to get to school with older, supportive children, or take him or her until other interventions can take place.
3. If your child is timid, and lacks friends, try to arrange for your child participate in positive social groups which meet his or her interests. Developing your child's special skills and confidence in the context of a positive social group can be very helpful.

What to do if Your Child is Aggressive or Bullies Others?

Take the problem seriously. Children and youth who bully others often get into serious trouble in later life, and may receive criminal convictions. They may have continuing trouble in their relationships with others. Here are some things you can do to turn the situation around.

1. Talk to your child, talk to his or her teachers and administrators. Keep in mind that a bully will try to deny or minimize his or her wrong-doing.
2. Make it clear to your child that you will not tolerate this kind of behavior, and discuss with your child the negative impact bullying has on the victims. Do not accept explanations that "it was all in fun."
3. Arrange for an effective, non-violent consequence, which is in proportion with the severity of your child's actions, and his or her age and stage of development. Corporal punishment carries the message that "might is right."

4. Increase your supervision of your child's activities and whereabouts, and who they are associating with. Spend time with your child, and set reasonable rules for their activities and curfews.
5. Co-operate with the school in modifying your child's aggressive behavior. Frequent communication with teachers and/or administrators is important to find out how your child is doing in changing his or her behavior.
6. Praise the efforts your child makes toward non-violent and responsible behavior, as well as for following home and school rules. Keep praising any efforts the child makes.
7. If your child is viewing violent television shows, including cartoons, and is playing violent video games, this will increase violent and aggressive behavior. Change family and child's viewing and play patterns to non-violent ones.
8. Make sure that your child is not seeing violence between members of his or her family. Modeling of aggressive behavior at home can lead to violence by the child against others at school and in later life.
9. Seek help from a school psychologist, social worker, or children's mental health centre in the community if you would like support in working with your child.

For more information on parenting resources visit www.clarkstonyouth.org
Or call the Clarkston Coalition for Youth at 248-922-3004.