

LIFE WITH A MIDDLE GRADER

Does your child seem like two different people? One minute she's a joy to be with—making you laugh, impressing you with clever insights, or offering help without being asked. The next moment, she's talking back, rolling her eyes, or making sarcastic comments.

Up-and-down behavior is normal for middle schoolers as they face the changes that adolescence brings. Read on to learn why your youngster acts the way she does and how you can handle common challenges.



Calm conversations



Your tween wants to spend the night at a friend's house, but she has an early soccer game and a family party tomorrow. When you tell her she has to stay home, she argues, "I'll be home in time to get ready. It's no big deal!"

As your child becomes more independent and begins to think for herself more, she may start to question your authority. If a power struggle starts, try these strategies.

Look for a compromise. Ask your middle grader to help brainstorm solutions that you'll both be satisfied with. For example, she wants to spend time with her friend, but she needs to get enough rest, so you might suggest that she go to her friend's for a while but come home to sleep. Or she might ask if her friend can sleep over at your house instead, and you can make sure they get to bed on time.

End debates. When a decision isn't negotiable, try to state the reason just once ("Tomorrow is a big day, and you need a good night's sleep"). If you keep explaining yourself in different ways, your youngster may try to poke holes in your reasoning. Instead, let her know you're not going to discuss it

further. ("Regardless, I want you to sleep here tonight. I'm not going to argue about this.") She'll eventually realize she's not getting anywhere and let the matter drop.

Tip: If a conversation with your child turns into an argument, suggest that you each find something else to do and talk later when you're calm.

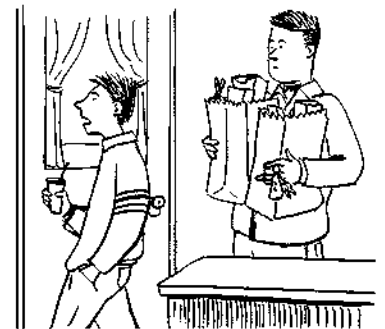
Polite words

When you ask your middle schooler to help carry in groceries, he rolls his eyes and replies, "Why can't you do it?" Or he calls you "old-fashioned" when you tell him to put his phone away at dinner.

With so many changes taking place in their lives, tweens can be more focused on themselves than on how they treat others. Stop back talk and other rude behavior with these ideas.

Explain what's acceptable. Let your child know that it's okay to share his thoughts, but not to be disrespectful. For example, he might ask, "Could I watch the rest of this show and then go to bed?" rather than, "That's ridiculous. Nobody goes to bed this early." Remind him that body language like eye rolling is impolite, too.

Hit the reset button. When your middle grader starts to talk back, try giving him a second chance. You might say, "Can you think of a better way to ask for a ride?" If he continues to be rude, let him know you'll listen when he's ready to be polite. He'll learn that he's more likely to get his way if he speaks nicely.



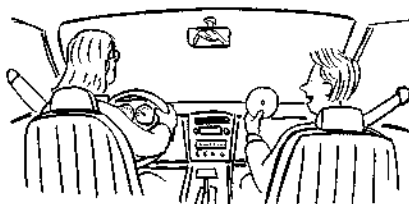
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Enjoying your middle grader

You might have more in common with your child than you think. And sharing good times can help you get along better. Try these ideas for reaching out:

- Read a book that your middle grader is reading. It will give you something to talk about. You might send her an email describing your favorite part or have a dinner conversation about the ending.

- Listen to music. When your son plays a song that you like, have him tell you the name. Ask if he has heard the latest song by an artist that you know he



likes. You might even create a playlist of songs you both enjoy and play it when you're in the car together.

- Share a hobby. Try one of her interests, and ask her to try one of yours. For example, if she likes photography, get your cameras and take a scenic hike so she can share picture-taking tips with you. If you bake, have her find a cake or cookie recipe to try together.

Mood swings

One day your middle schooler is laughing and saying she loves her life, and the next day she's holed up in her room asking to be left alone. Shifting moods are part of life with a tween—surging hormones and a changing body can make it tough to control feelings. Here are some suggestions for dealing with the ups and downs.

Focus on prevention. Your child's moods will be more consistent if she gets enough sleep (at least 9 hours a night), eats well, and avoids caffeine. It will also help if she knows what to expect each day. For instance, let her know if you have to work late or if your family has a busy weekend coming up.

Talk when she's ready. If your middle grader has a rough day, try to avoid asking her questions until you sense that she

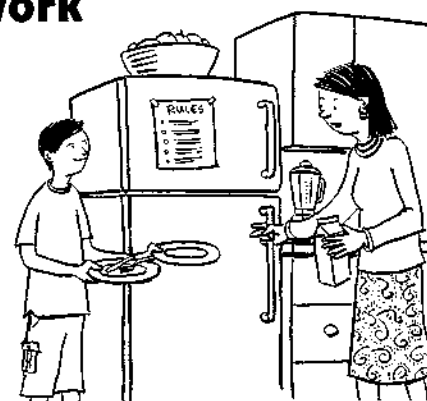


wants to talk. She might show that she's ready to open up by sitting down near you or by asking what you're doing. Then, you can start a conversation by sharing something about your own day and perhaps follow up by casually asking about hers. If you pry too much when she's in a bad mood, she's likely to shut down even more.

Boost confidence. Your youngster might feel anxious about the changes in her body. Perhaps she wonders if she's developing normally or why some kids are taller or shorter than she is. A physical activity that she likes or is good at can help her feel more confident about her body. For instance, one child might like dancing or doing gymnastics, and another might enjoy martial arts or field hockey.

Rules that work

Middle graders want more freedom, and they sometimes break rules to get it. And because your youngster's social life is so important at this age, he may care more about his friends' opinions than he does about pleasing you. Try these tips for handling discipline effectively.



Make rules clear. Consider putting rules in writing and posting them on the refrigerator. 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. *Examples:* "Finish homework before playing" and "Get permission before going out." If he argues, simply point to the rule.

Choose reasonable consequences. Your middle grader might be more likely to accept a consequence if it's closely related to the rule he broke. For instance, if he texts at dinner, he might lose his phone for the evening. Or if he doesn't finish homework on time, he can't go to play basketball with his friends.

Seek his input. Ask your tween, "If you could change one household rule, which one would it be?" For example, he might want a later curfew on the weekend, or he may wish family members could rotate chores so he's not always doing the same ones. If you feel comfortable with one of his ideas, suggest a trial run. Plan to follow up in a week or two to discuss the new rule, and let him know that you reserve the right to switch back or try something different if it's not working out.

Middle Years