

Supporting Your Middle Grader



The middle school years can be exciting, as your child moves toward adulthood and enjoys new experiences. But they can also bring challenges, like finding ways to keep connected with your tween and helping him handle peer pressure. Here's how to support your child and help him thrive.

Stay in the loop

As your tween becomes more independent, he may not want to spend as much time at home or with you. These ideas can keep the lines of communication open and let him know you care.

● **Reach out.** Ask specific questions, like what he's learning in history class or who won last night's football game. You could also send texts or leave supportive notes for him. ("Good luck on your presentation. I can't wait to hear how it goes!")



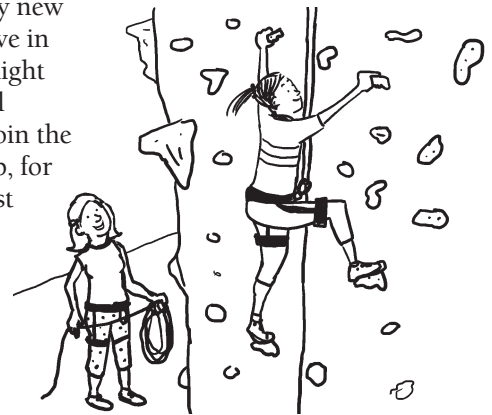
● **Make friends welcome.** Social circles are important at this age. By encouraging your child to invite friends home or on family outings, you'll show that what matters to him matters to you. You may also get to spend more time together.

● **Use car time.** Many parents find the car to be a great place for conversations with their kids. When you drive your middle schooler to piano practice or to get a haircut, make the most of it. If he's quiet, try talking about your day or sharing family news to get the conversation started.

Build self-esteem

Middle graders can feel unsure of themselves from time to time. Help your tween develop a good self-image with strategies like these.

● **Encourage confidence-boosting hobbies.** Noncompetitive activities provide a safe way for your child to try new things and to believe in her abilities. She might work on the school poetry journal or join the environmental club, for instance. Or suggest physical activities such as yoga or rock climbing, which can make her feel good about her body without pressure to compete.



● **Be there.** Make your middle grader feel valued by attending events she cares about. For example, if she's on the sound crew for the school play, go to opening night. If she loves horses, take her to a horse show.

● **Celebrate strengths.** Everyone is better at some things than others. If your youngster puts herself down, challenge her to list at least five of her strong points. *Examples:* "I'm a good babysitter." "I have a great memory." When she wants to improve at something (say, skateboarding), suggest that she set a goal and make a plan for achieving it, such as practicing 30 minutes three times a week.

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Be proactive about peer pressure

Tweens care a lot about what their friends think, and this is the age when they're most likely to be introduced to alcohol, cigarettes, vaping, and other drugs. But research shows they're also influenced by their parents' opinions. Help your child manage peer pressure and avoid dangerous behaviors with these tips.

- **Practice specific responses.** It's hard for tweens to think clearly when they're on the spot. Planning ahead can help your child make good choices. Role-play what she could do if friends asked her to drink beer, for instance. She might say, "No, that sounds dangerous." Or she could come up with an alternative. ("Let's go to the park instead.")
- **Encourage safe activities.** Help your child find groups centered around drug-free forms of fun. You might encourage her to sign up for a youth program at a community center, join a bowling league, or attend middle-school events at places of worship. Also, encourage her to think of safe ways to occupy time with friends (experimenting with hairstyles, playing Ping-Pong).
- **Keep talking.** Hearing the same message on different occasions will let it sink in and give your middle schooler plenty of chances to share concerns. You might bring up drugs by mentioning a news report you heard. Or ask what she learned about alcohol in health class. Be clear about where you stand and why, and discuss what could happen if she drinks, smokes, vapes, or does drugs. For example, she could become addicted, get grounded, or even be arrested.

Discuss bullying

Bullying tends to peak in middle school. Consider this advice to help your tween avoid being bullied—or avoid bullying others.

- **Set a standard.** Explain that if he isn't sure whether a comment or an action would hurt someone, he shouldn't say or do it. Suggest that he ask himself, "Would I act like this if my



grandparents or the principal were watching?"

- **Prevent cyberbullying.** Does your child text or post online? Remind him to type kind messages and to communicate only with others who do, too. Explain that if someone sends a hurtful or nasty message, he shouldn't respond, since that can escalate the problem. Instead, he should block the sender and tell you.
- **Take action.** Your middle grader can help stop bullying by speaking up. Let him know it's important that he tell a teacher or another adult if he is bullied or if he witnesses bullying. Also, talk about how he can respond to bullying. For example, he should stay calm, walk away, and get help.

Manage stress

More responsibilities at home and at school can cause your child to feel stressed sometimes. Try these suggestions for supporting her.

- **Stick to routines.** Knowing what to expect can make your youngster's life more predictable and less stressful. Help her set up routines that work for both of you, such as having her do homework right after school or packing her lunch at night. She might need to create new routines as her schedule changes. When swimming season starts, for example, she may have to do homework after dinner.
- **Pay attention to sources of anxiety.** Does your tween have a tendency to put off big projects and then stress about them at the last minute? Remind her of this, and brainstorm ways to prevent it from happening again. For example, she should start work sooner and perhaps buddy up with a classmate to stay on track. Or if she's irritable because she isn't getting enough sleep, set an earlier bedtime.



- **Watch for bigger issues.** Some stress is normal for middle graders. But symptoms that last more than two weeks may indicate a problem. If your child isolates herself from friends and activities, complains of headaches or stomachaches, or is often tired or sad, have her see her doctor. A professional can rule out physical causes and suggest ways to help if she has anxiety or depression.

Middle Years