

Skills for Good Parenting: Middle School – Focus on the child

You have to parent the child you have. One of the greatest challenges you face as a parent is to continually adjust your parenting approach to reflect the temperament, learning styles, and developmental stage of each individual child. Once your child crosses into adolescence, parenting becomes much more challenging. At any given moment, you have to be sensitive to who your child is and where they are at that moment. Middle schoolers shift from child-like to adult-like in an instant depending on a whole host of variables. While your pre-teen jumps all over the place, you need to stay centered, remembering your core values and goals, adjusting your approach to accomplish your parenting goal of the moment, while keeping your eye on the long game.

And in addition to parenting the child you have, you need to parent that child in the world in which he sees himself. The contrast between his experiences and yours at his age is probably enormous. You can't be an effective parent if you are parenting your son as if he were living in the world in which you grew up. This means that you can't just re-use the rules that you were raised with. You have to think ahead, be mindful, and be observant.

You don't want your middle schooler to think "I'm bad" or "I'm stupid" after you've disciplined them. When your pre-teen has made a mistake or misbehaved, you still need to separate the behavior from the child. The Center for Parenting Education's "Consequences Made Easy" puts it nicely:

Parents use consequences as a result of their children's behaviors. But while concerning yourself with your children's actions, you need to discipline in a way that keeps your child's self-esteem intact. You can do this by not ridiculing or shaming them as you discipline them.

Aside from not tearing them down, you can actually build their self-esteem by holding them accountable and having expectations for their behavior – the message given is: "You are capable of doing better. I expect more of you."

Such expectations tell children that they possess the ability to behave, tolerate disappointment and frustration, delay gratification, grow, and do better – all of which builds their self-esteem.

Let's consider the child you are parenting right now. If your middle schooler runs wild after school with their friends and gets into trouble, even if they know that they shouldn't have done it, you don't accomplish anything by asking them to explain why they behaved that way. Significant brain development occurs during adolescence. From ages 11 to 25, young people's brains are maturing, especially the pre-frontal cortex, which is responsible for managing time, controlling impulses, organizing, prioritizing and making good decision. They are driven to seek new experiences but because they aren't able to control their impulses, they make mistakes and can't explain why.

As a parent, you will spend a great deal of time on instant replay, helping your child to walk through what they did, what the repercussions were, and to discuss what they should have done. This replaying gives them a roadmap for making better choices. In the same way that you spent endless hours helping them learn to walk, now you need to spend time helping them to establish healthy patterns of behavior.

Label a specific behavior as problematic, don't label your child. Pre-teens are quick to think of themselves as bad or stupid and are also highly attuned to what their peers will think, ahead of whether or not something is inherently good. Use "I" statements when expressing displeasure with their behavior or actions and tell your middle schooler why they should or shouldn't do something. "It is very dangerous to ride a bike without a helmet on. Seeing you without your bike helmet makes me upset, I am worried that you will get hurt if you don't wear it." You are helping your child learn how to make good decisions. The more direct and specific you are, the greater the impact you will have on your child, and the more likely it is that they will remember what you have told them and act appropriately. At this age, showing them external evidence to support your position reinforces your argument.

Trust your instinct if something seems "off" with your child. While pre-teens experience a lot of emotional turmoil, this too can be caused by something deeper. Misbehavior can be a cue that something deeper and more serious is going on. Better to reach out for help to rule out underlying problems.

Keep in mind the child's temperament (see resources for information about different temperaments) and their fit within the environment. Perhaps you're a very calm, casual, laid-back parent, and your child is highly anxious. This is a difference in temperament and fit. You may need to adjust your parenting style to match your child's temperament.

You need to continue to encourage your child to not fall into gender stereotypes. They are dealing with so much pressure to conform, do everything you can to help them be who they are. It's too early to cut off possibilities, especially as children this age are becoming more independent and defining who they are for themselves.

Middle schoolers will be feeling a lot of emotions, as a parent you can help them to recognize them, label them, and express them appropriately, whatever they may be. Just because your pre-teen has a growing ability to understand and express complex thoughts doesn't mean that they will want to do so with you. Because of this, it may be easier to talk about emotions expressed in books, movies or t.v. shows. When you talk about an emotion felt by a fictional character, what your middle schooler may be feeling is kept a safe distance away.

Think too about what example you are setting for your child. We all "lose it" sometimes; when you do, afterwards, acknowledge the inappropriateness of your outburst, and the challenge of keeping strong emotions in check. If the outburst was directed at your child, apologize. If you have been able to walk away from confrontations with your child, telling her "I'm too angry to talk about this right now..." you have provided another teachable moment.

You are not the only role model for your middle schooler, but you are probably still the most important one. Be the adult you want your daughter to grow up to be.

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