

Positive Parenting: Middle School - Pick your Spot

It is important to know your limits and stick to them. Typically, your pre-teen will push those limits in predictable ways in routine situations and with increasing frequency. Ahead of time, before you get into one of those situations, know what your limit is going to be.

The first step is to identify what is important to you – what are your values? Is it more important to you that your house be clean or that you have more family time? Do you feel homework should always come first, or do you want your middle schooler to spend lots of time with friends? Is it more important that your pre-teen has lots of after-school activities or unstructured down-time? Once you have thought about what is more important to you in a particular situation, you'll be clear on what your next steps are.

Then, ask yourself what are your boundaries or limits? What behavior matters most to you and what expectations are age appropriate?

We're not thinking about situations where you will establish consequences for your child misbehaving. Here we are focusing on you, as a parent, remaining firm and consistent in maintaining an established limit. If you are going to set a limit for the amount of screen time your child can have after school, you need to be ready to consistently enforce that limit. For your child to learn that there are limits, you, your partner, spouse (or other caregiver) all have to deliver the same message.

Pre-teens take more control of their social lives so you need to be crystal clear about your limits. Are you going to allow your pre-teen to spend time in a house where no adult is present? What if you don't know the family involved? When your child announces that they are "going to hang-out with so-and-so after school" are you ok with that, or not? You need to figure out how these situations line up with your family's boundaries and identify your position ahead of time. It may take some effort to make sure that you are being consistent. You need to have "ground-rules" that you are able to enforce consistently. These ground-rules are the important boundaries that you have drawn for your family and that everyone understands and is expected to follow. You need to make clear to your middle schooler why you have set certain ground rules, whether the rule is based on your values or simply because you are the adult.

There will be times when your pre-teen throws you a curve ball. It's possible that your initial response won't be consistent with your boundaries. After the fact, but before the situation arises again, you need to communicate clearly that what you allowed the first time will not be allowed again and why. Be prepared to tell your child that you made a mistake and that, after further reflection, you will have a different response in the future.

Know what you are going to say. If you are going to say yes, say "yes" the first time they ask. If you're going to say no, say no and stick to it.

It would be easy to spend all of your time and energy battling with your children, but it would not be advisable or effective. Pick your battles. Your children should know what the ground rules are and the rationale for them. Be consistent in what you say and in the rules you set. The battles you pick should matter to you, reflecting your values. If you think it's really important for everyone to treat each other civilly, do not tolerate rudeness from your child. But your behavior has to reflect your values as well; you must model the behavior you want to see from your child. This means that you have to curb your sarcasm and quick retorts and speak to them calmly and civilly. Show them the behavior that you expect to see from them, whether that be words, actions or anything else you'd like to see them do.

Remember too that as children mature, you will have to give them more responsibility, negotiate some issues, and create safe opportunities for them to learn from their mistakes. With your children in middle school, picking your spot becomes textured. The boundaries you are enforcing are going to be more contentious and the push-back may be explosive.

Pause here and start to think about what battles really matter to you. Your goal is not to resolve with absolute certainty what those battles are. Go back later after you've made a preliminary list and talk about the list with your spouse or partner. Try to get on the same page so that your responses are consistent. Don't start off too ambitiously; better to pick just something relatively easy to be consistent about to build your muscle for holding firm.

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