

Skills for Good Parenting: Middle School - You, Your Child and the World

Children learn from their environment and from what they are exposed to. Once you, the parent, have a handle on what matters to you as a family, teachable moments surround you. When your child is young, this isn't too hard. However, as children grow and they distance themselves from their family, you will have to work a little harder.

In this age of social media and electronic entertainment, your student is being exposed to things you never even dreamt of when you were his age – some good, some horrifying. As your child shifts his alliance from his family to his peers, don't let up on keeping abreast of what he is seeing/reading/playing. If your pre-teen spends hours along in her bedroom streaming shows on Netflix, go on Netflix yourself, and watch the shows your child has been watching. You may not be welcome to watch them with her but you can certainly remain aware of what it is she is watching. And when you find something that raises concerns, you need to follow up with a discussion about that topic. Recently, the popular Netflix series "13 Reasons Why" raised many concerns for parents. Even if you and your middle schooler didn't watch it together, you can still talk to her about the show's content or issues raised. If you want some guidance or insight into media content, Commonsensemedia.com is a great resource for getting a sense of content and what is age appropriate.

Your child is probably already active on social media, but that doesn't mean there shouldn't be rules and expectations. Set parameters. For pre-teens, if they want to have a social media presence, you have to be a friend with full access, after, of course, promising NEVER to post anything on their wall/page/whatever. Use parental controls. If you need help doing this, check your provider's website or just google parental controls for whatever platform you use. There are multiple areas of concern as your child ventures out onto the web – that their interactions on social media reflect your family's values (no cyberbullying!!!), that they remain safe as they potentially interact with strangers who might be predators, and that their online identity will endure and might jeopardize future college plans or career opportunities. If your child resists friending you, find a trusted adult friend or relative who can alert you to any inappropriate or dangerous online behavior.

One important lesson to teach at any age is that a child's online identity belongs to HIM, and a simple way to teach this is to ask his permission before you post his photo, or information about his accomplishments, on your Facebook page or Instagram account. This will help him enforce the same boundaries with his friends. And of course, it's important that it isn't just you looking out for your child's safety, but that your child needs to learn how to responsibly interact online, both to protect themselves and to be a good on-line citizen.

As your maturing child engages with the outside world, talk about the news and issues that you are hearing about or that family members are involved with. Listen to what your teen is saying. Use open ended questions to try to get them to open up. You can even choose family movie night selections that might start a conversation. Be honest about what you believe and why and why you want them to do (or not do) something.

All along the way, find ways to act on your beliefs, with or without your child.

Remember that you are always on stage for them. Swearing at another driver, using your cell phone in the car, volunteering at a soup kitchen, getting involved in politics, being conscientious about recycling... are all observed and absorbed. Talk to your kids about being a global citizen and what this means. Don't be afraid to use yourself as an example whether of what's happening in your day to day life now or of when you were growing up.

Sometimes with adolescents, it may seem that all your "good advice" is rejected or ignored, but give it time. It may take 3, 5 or 10 years, but there is a good chance that they will do you proud.

SDJ 8/13/18