

The Middle Schooler

Get Ready for Changes and the Ride of Your Life!

Although sometimes they don't show it by actions or words, young adolescents really are devoted to their families and are very much affected by them. The family provides a safe place to be oneself, to grow and change, and to give and receive love. The young adolescent child is undergoing some of the most dramatic changes in a lifetime and will look to the family to provide the support they need.

All preadolescents experience changes to one degree or another. Their bodies and hormones are changing. Their attitudes and values are changing. Their friends are changing and even their intellectual processes are changing. The once charming, loving, capable child has now become forgetful, irresponsible, and sometimes even downright sulky and belligerent!

Here are a few things to expect and some ideas on how to continue to love and support this new person in your household.

****Forgetting**

Young adolescents do not forget on purpose. Even though it seems that no one could be this disorganized without working really hard at it, forgetfulness is truly part of the age and developmental process. Their minds are more preoccupied with issues which are more real and meaningful to them. They are anxious about the way the world perceives them and always think 'it's all about them.'

You can help kids who forget by encouraging them to keep their agenda updated with assignments and due dates, and reminding them to check it often. Avoid nagging, but instead impose a scheduled homework time and provide rewards and incentives for completion.

****Irritability**

Preadolescents' hormones are changing and these changes bring on moods that are unpredictable and physically draining. Often the child becomes argumentative and if we don't watch it, pretty soon we are acting like the preadolescent. Don't argue with an irritable middle schooler, as arguing escalates everything. Remember, the mood will usually disappear as soon as it came.

Step back and say something like, "Let's get back to this conversation later." This will often diffuse the situation and later on when the mood swings the other way, you can talk the issue over more quietly and avoid the humiliation and embarrassment of engaging in a fight where no one wins.

Listen carefully and avoid lecturing. Middle schoolers hate to be given a sermon and will usually turn off or become defensive. Don't bring in other issues like, "Your room is a mess!" Finally, don't let your preadolescent's moods rule your moods. Your calmness will offer a sense of stability and harmony to your middle schooler's life.

****Power Plays**

As your preadolescent matures, they look for more independence. They are not little children anymore and yet they aren't ready for the kind of independence and decision making they desire. Middle schoolers will often use power plays like smarting off, manipulation, and non-verbal tantrums. This friction is an attempt to exert power and begin separating from adult control.

The best way to deal with power plays is to be prepared. Expect occasional conflicts and choose your battles wisely. What's more important, their hairstyle and clothing or their homework? Don't give in to manipulation, remember they've spent a decade figuring out just how to persuade you into giving them what they want. Learn to disengage from power struggles when you feel yourself at the end of your ability to stay reasonable and before you end up belittling your child. Sometimes it's OK to bend a little and give your middle schooler appropriate power when possible. Know what decisions he or she can make. Negotiate more, listen more and command less.

****Friendships**

Friendships will become the center of your preadolescent's life. Expect to be left out. Their growing secrecy gives them a sense of power over you and their lives. It's hard to accept, but your child is growing up and needs a personal life separate from the family. However, this does not mean that you should become less demanding to know where your child is going and with whom. Demand that they stick to a strict and early curfew. They should not have long periods of unsupervised time and parents need to work together. Get to know your child's friends' parents. You might be pleased to see that you're not "the only parents who won't let them go..."

Work hard at building up their self esteem. Middle schoolers have a lot of trouble believing in themselves and seeing their good qualities. Build on your child's strengths rather than highlight his or her weaknesses. Ask yourself, of the last ten comments you made to your middle schooler, how many were positive? Nothing helps a child fight peer pressure or cope with the loss of a friendship better than feeling good about him or herself.

****Worries and Joys**

As parents, it is natural to worry about our children, but don't forget that they also worry about themselves. Middle schoolers feel as if the whole world is watching them. They are convinced that they are the only one who has ever felt like them, and they do not want to be different. They begin to worry about what other people think of them and feel

like they will 'just die of embarrassment' on a regular basis. Their ups and downs are enough to make us think that we're the ones who are going crazy.

Living with a preadolescent though, can be exciting and interesting. You will have opportunities for actual dialogs and will be impressed by your child's developing ability to think and imagine mature ideas and handle more complex social interactions.

Adapted from H.E.L.P. How to Enjoy Living with a Preadolescent