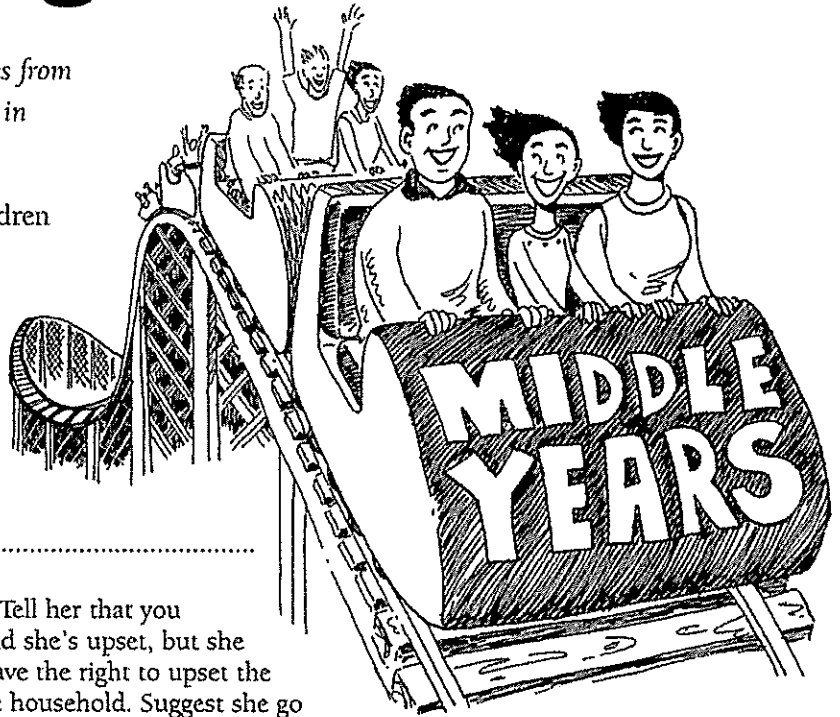


Understanding your middle grader

"What a roller coaster ride! My middle grader goes from being helpful and considerate to angry and stubborn in the blink of an eye."

The middle years are full of challenges. As children become teens, they display new attitudes and reactions that appear to come out of nowhere. While it may seem like your middle grader is misbehaving, these qualities are actually a natural part of growing up.

Here are some typical middle grader behaviors and suggestions for ways to handle them.



Moody

One minute your child wants you to help her with her homework. The next minute she wants you to leave her alone.

This behavior may make you wonder what's going on. The answer is simple. Your child is becoming an adolescent. Middle graders tend to be very moody. One minute they're happy, the next they're angry. These sudden moods can be difficult to predict and even harder to cope with.

Suggestions: The best approach parents can take is to ignore as much of this erratic behavior as possible. Changing hormone levels in your child make it next to impossible for her to control her emotions.

So, what do you do? First, keep in mind that her moods have little to do with you—and try not to take them personally. If you don't comment, chances are they'll disappear as quickly as they arrived. The more attention you give them, the longer they're likely to stick around.

However, this doesn't give your middle grader a license to walk all

over you. Tell her that you understand she's upset, but she doesn't have the right to upset the rest of the household. Suggest she go to another room if she's not feeling sociable. When she comes out, try to forget anything happened. She will probably forget about it, too.

Private

Has a sign that reads, "Keep out. This means you!" suddenly appeared on your child's door?

It's natural for middle graders to want more privacy as they grow older. They're beginning to see themselves as unique individuals who need more space. Also, changes in their bodies during puberty may make them want to stake out an area of the house as their own.



Suggestions: The next time your middle grader shouts, "Just leave me alone" and slams the door, consider taking his advice. He may be trying to say, "This room is my private area." Having a private place can help him cool off and relax.

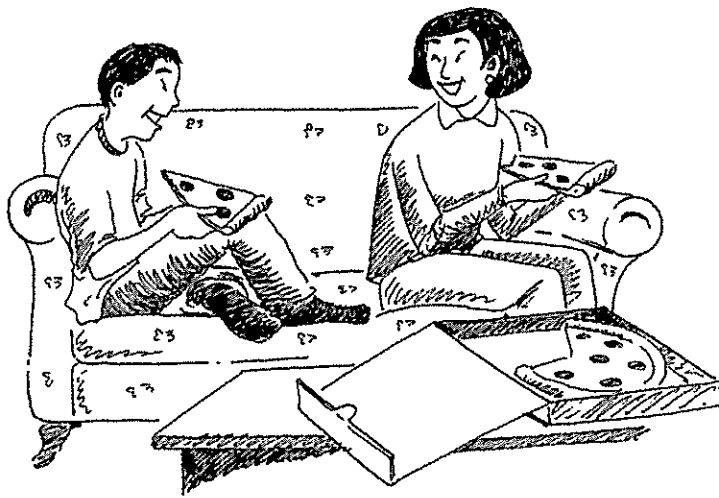
If you haven't already established rules such as "Knock before opening a closed door," consider doing so. Tell your middle grader that you respect his need for privacy and expect the same treatment in return. Chances are he'll understand where you're coming from.

Allowing your child to have privacy doesn't mean he has complete

control over the room, however. Let him know your expectations on how the room is kept (dirty clothes in laundry basket, no trash on floor, etc.).

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Middle Years

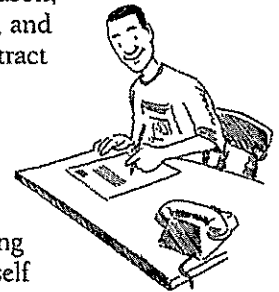


Whenever you want to ask questions about your middle grader's life, try to remain as casual as possible. If your questions are too probing, she's likely to feel attacked, which may make her respond defensively.

Argumentative

"Why do I have to do my homework before I can talk on the phone? I think that's so dumb."

If your middle grader always takes the opposite side of your opinion, don't get too upset. At this age, disagreeing is a way for your child to try out her growing brainpower. Her mind has begun to reason, make decisions, and understand abstract ideas.



Disagreeing is a great way for her to think out loud. She's trying to separate herself from you and prove she can do things her own way.

Suggestions: Try to remember that no matter what you say, chances are your middle grader will hold an opinion different from yours. She is learning to defend her argument—a valuable skill she'll need to resist peer pressure. Likewise, she's trying to sort out what she likes and dislikes, from hairstyles to values. It's also a way for her to learn the thinking behind your rules. She's testing you to see why you hold certain beliefs.

However, it's important that your child remain respectful when expressing her views. Explain that just because she disagrees with an idea doesn't mean she has to respond rudely.

Editor's Note: Even though the middle years can be tough, try not to throw your arms up in despair. Research shows that middle graders need their parents' guidance now more than ever.

Sensitive

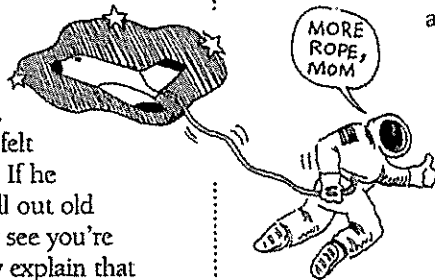
"I don't want anyone at the restaurant to see me. I hate the way I look."

As middle graders mature, their bodies start changing in uncontrollable ways. Examples: acne, growth spurts, facial hair. This often makes them feel awkward about their appearance.

Suggestions: When your child makes negative comments about his appearance, listen to what he says. Try to avoid immediately reassuring him. Instead, make comments that prompt him to describe his feelings. *Example:* "That must be really tough." This encourages him to open up about his emotions.

Make your comments in a matter-of-fact tone. Middle graders are likely to find joking and teasing hurtful, even if you're just trying to be funny.

Talk about how you felt when you were his age. If he doesn't believe you, pull out old photos. He will quickly see you're telling the truth. Gently explain that his friends probably feel the same way about their bodies. Let him know that these changes will be less and less noticeable as he gets older.



Independent

Your middle grader seems unhappy, so you ask her what's wrong. "Nothing," she replies. Then, she spends an hour on the phone telling a friend about her troubles.

As a parent, this may feel like rejection. For the first years of her life, your child relied on you to help her fix what was bothering her. Now she turns to friends for help.

Although you may feel like you've done something wrong, middle graders naturally begin to form relationships outside the family. It's part of growing up—depending less on parents to meet all their needs.

Suggestions: The key to this stage of your child's life is to allow her to make more decisions about how and when she does things. But make it clear that her newfound freedom has conditions. For example, so long as her work gets done, you'll try to stay out of her hair.

But if she stops meeting her obligations, remind her that you'll step in and take over.

Middle Years

LIFE WITH A MIDDLE GRADER



Does your child seem like two different people? One minute she's a joy to be with—making you laugh, impressing you with clever insights, or offering help without being asked. The next moment, she's talking back, rolling her eyes, or making sarcastic comments.

Up-and-down behavior is normal for middle schoolers as they face the changes that adolescence brings. Read on to learn why your youngster acts the way she does and how you can handle common challenges.

Calm conversations



Your tween wants to spend the night at a friend's house, but she has an early soccer game and a family party tomorrow. When you tell her she has to stay home, she argues, "I'll be home in time to get ready. It's no big deal!"

As your child becomes more independent and begins

to think for herself more, she may start to question your authority. If a power struggle starts, try these strategies.

Look for a compromise. Ask your middle grader to help brainstorm solutions that you'll both be satisfied with. For example, she wants to spend time with her friend, but she needs to get enough rest, so you might suggest that she go to her friend's for a while but come home to sleep. Or she might ask if her friend can sleep over at your house instead, and you can make sure they get to bed on time.

End debates. When a decision isn't negotiable, try to state the reason just once ("Tomorrow is a big day, and you need a good night's sleep"). If you keep explaining yourself in different ways, your youngster may try to poke holes in your reasoning. Instead, let her know you're not going to discuss it

further. ("Regardless, I want you to sleep here tonight. I'm not going to argue about this.") She'll eventually realize she's not getting anywhere and let the matter drop.

Tip: If a conversation with your child turns into an argument, suggest that you each find something else to do and talk later when you're calm.

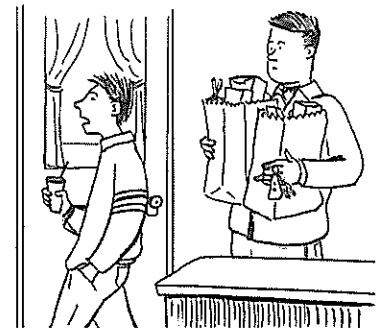
Polite words

When you ask your middle schooler to help carry in groceries, he rolls his eyes and replies, "Why can't you do it?" Or he calls you "old-fashioned" when you tell him to put his phone away at dinner.

With so many changes taking place in their lives, tweens can be more focused on themselves than on how they treat others. Stop back talk and other rude behavior with these ideas.

Explain what's acceptable. Let your child know that it's okay to share his thoughts, but not to be disrespectful. For example, he might ask, "Could I watch the rest of this show and then go to bed?" rather than, "That's ridiculous. Nobody goes to bed this early." Remind him that body language like eye rolling is impolite, too.

Hit the reset button. When your middle grader starts to talk back, try giving him a second chance. You might say, "Can you think of a better way to ask for a ride?" If he continues to be rude, let him know you'll listen when he's ready to be polite. He'll learn that he's more likely to get his way if he speaks nicely.



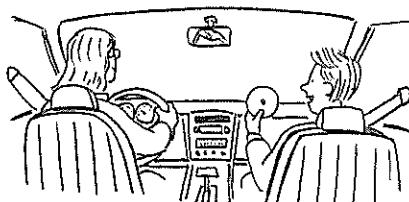
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Enjoying your middle grader

You might have more in common with your child than you think. And sharing good times can help you get along better. Try these ideas for reaching out:

- Read a book that your middle grader is reading. It will give you something to talk about. You might send her an email describing your favorite part or have a dinner conversation about the ending.

- Listen to music. When your son plays a song that you like, have him tell you the name. Ask if he has heard the latest song by an artist that you know he



likes. You might even create a playlist of songs you both enjoy and play it when you're in the car together.

- Share a hobby. Try one of her interests, and ask her to try one of yours. For example, if she likes photography, get your cameras and take a scenic hike so she can share picture-taking tips with you. If you bake, have her find a cake or cookie recipe to try together.

Mood swings

One day your middle schooler is laughing and saying she loves her life, and the next day she's holed up in her room asking to be left alone. Shifting moods are part of life with a tween—surging hormones and a changing body can make it tough to control feelings. Here are some suggestions for dealing with the ups and downs.

Focus on prevention. Your child's moods will be more consistent if she gets enough sleep (at least 9 hours a night), eats well, and avoids caffeine. It will also help if she knows what to expect each day. For instance, let her know if you have to work late or if your family has a busy weekend coming up.

Talk when she's ready. If your middle grader has a rough day, try to avoid asking her questions until you sense that she

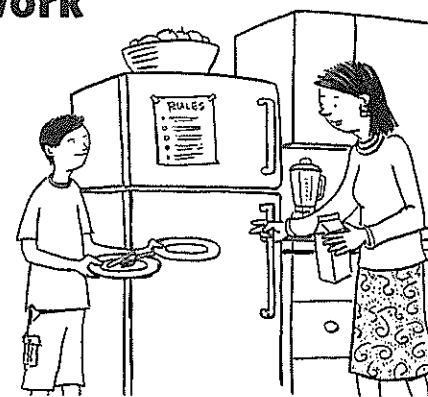


wants to talk. She might show that she's ready to open up by sitting down near you or by asking what you're doing. Then, you can start a conversation by sharing something about your own day and perhaps follow up by casually asking about hers. If you pry too much when she's in a bad mood, she's likely to shut down even more.

Boost confidence. Your youngster might feel anxious about the changes in her body. Perhaps she wonders if she's developing normally or why some kids are taller or shorter than she is. A physical activity that she likes or is good at can help her feel more confident about her body. For instance, one child might like dancing or doing gymnastics, and another might enjoy martial arts or field hockey.

Rules that work

Middle graders want more freedom, and they sometimes break rules to get it. And because your youngster's social life is so important at this age, he may care more about his friends' opinions than he does about pleasing you. Try these tips for handling discipline effectively.



Make rules clear. Consider putting rules in writing and posting them on the refrigerator. Having fewer rules makes them easier for your child to remember—and for you to enforce—so try sticking to the ones that matter most. *Examples:* "Finish homework before playing" and "Get permission before going out." If he argues, simply point to the rule.

Choose reasonable consequences. Your middle grader might be more likely to accept a consequence if it's closely related to the rule he broke. For instance, if he texts at dinner, he might lose his phone for the evening. Or if he doesn't finish homework on time, he can't go to play basketball with his friends.

Seek his input. Ask your tween, "If you could change one household rule, which one would it be?" For example, he might want a later curfew on the weekend, or he may wish family members could rotate chores so he's not always doing the same ones. If you feel comfortable with one of his ideas, suggest a trial run. Plan to follow up in a week or two to discuss the new rule, and let him know that you reserve the right to switch back or try something different if it's not working out.

Middle Years