

# What's Best for Kids? Tips for Parents

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**The first tip is thinking ahead...** One of our best tools as parents is being prepared. As your son or daughter gets to the middle school years, get ready for at least occasional conflicts. Think through what is truly important to you. Is the youngster's hairstyle as important as homework? Isn't curfew more of a concern than crabbiness? Obviously, dawdling is a lot easier to accept than drugs. As these give-and-take situations start, know ahead of time what areas you are willing to negotiate and what areas are absolutes.

**Break down big chores into small parts.** Sometimes young people feel overwhelmed by tasks, especially those they've let go for a long time. A disastrous bedroom, twenty-three overdue math assignments, a long-term project that's "suddenly" due in a few days (or hours!); all of these cause the preadolescent to choose to give up rather than get started.

**Help your child by setting up smaller goals:** clean off your bed; get five assignments done tonight; assemble the materials for the project. Preadolescents have trouble structuring tasks so that they are more approachable. In an even and off-hand way, we can help them in this.

**Encourage your middle schooler to keep a daily list** (weekly is too much) with a few things on it to be done that day. It may be necessary to assign a specific time to each task. When the task is completed, draw a line through it to show accomplishment.

**Don't hesitate to remind your middle schooler about appointments and due dates.** Try to think ahead about materials required for a project (unless you look forward to late-evening visits to K-Mart). This will not last forever. When this same child was learning to walk, we held his or her hands and made the path smooth. Now he or she is learning to take on a tremendous assortment of life-tasks and changes; hand-holding (but not the firm, physical grip previously necessary) is needed for about a year or so as your middle schooler gets started on the road to being a responsible adult.

**Be willing to listen, but don't poke or pry.** Kids this age value independence and often seem secretive. Keeping to themselves is part of the separateness they are trying to create. Let them know you'd love to help them, but don't push them into a defensive position.

**If your child is in the midst of a longtime friendship that is falling apart, the best thing you can do is stand by and be a good listener.** It is devastating for us to see our children hurting, but taking sides or intervening is not appropriate, nor will it help. Young adolescents do survive these hurts, especially if they know we are there to listen to their pain.

**Friends are people who accept us as we are.** They listen, they don't needlessly criticize, they back us up when we're right and pick us up when we're down. Be a friend to your middle schooler; some days kids feel you're the only one they have.

**All friendships have ups and downs.** Children need to learn that being "best friends" isn't always smooth sailing. People have differences of opinion and even get angry, but they still care for each other. This is what's going on when we get involved in those "I-hate-her-she-is-so-stuck-up-and-how-could-she-do-this-to-me" conversations. As parents we must help our kids see that one problem doesn't ruin a relationship, but stubbornness might. Middle schoolers have a lot of spats and falling outs, but often the friends are back together again in a short time.

**When reprimanding, deal only with the precise problem, don't bring in other issues.** "The trash is still here, and I want it out, now," is better than, "You are so lazy! I told you to take that trash out two hours ago and it's still here! You'd live in a pigsty, wouldn't you? Well, you aren't the only one in this house, you know..."

**If the issue is minor, keep things light.** The shoes on the floor, the wet towel on the bed, the carton left open; these are maddening, perhaps, but not earth-shattering. Call attention to them in a humorous way, so your middle-schooler knows you want action but you aren't being punitive. "Either the cat's smarter than I thought or you left the milk carton open on the counter. One of you please put it back before it spoils."

**Don't use power unless it's urgent.** Parents have the ultimate power, and kids know it. We don't have to "prove" it to them at every turn. Save your strength for those really important issues you've decided are non-negotiable. Eventually kids are going to possess power of their own, and we want them to be able to use it wisely.

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