

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.



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.

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

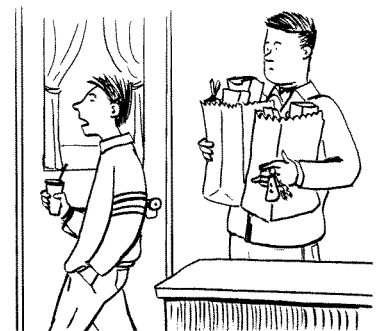
Polite words

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.



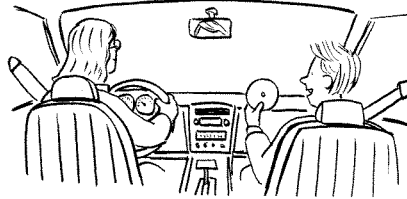
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Enjoying your middle grader

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.

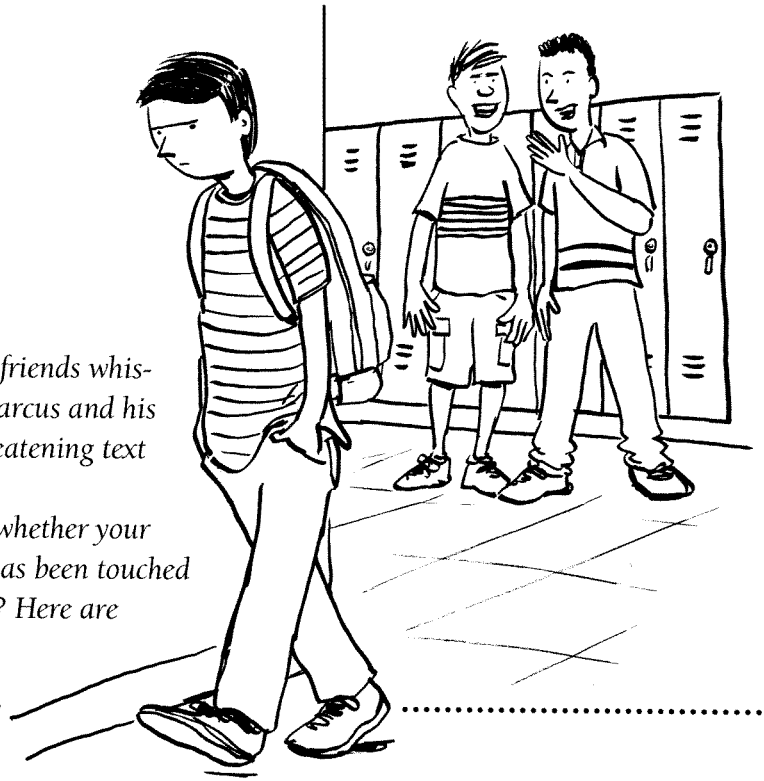
Middle Years

Bullying

Q&A's

Lisa sits quietly at the “popular” lunch table while her friends whisper about an overweight classmate. On the school bus, Marcus and his buddies push a younger boy off his seat. Ellie receives threatening text messages from her ex-boyfriend.

These middle graders are all affected by bullying. And whether your child is a witness, a bully, or a victim, it's likely that she has been touched by the problem at some point, too. What can a parent do? Here are answers to common questions about bullying.



Q What is bullying?

A Bullying ranges from rejection (“This table isn’t for geeks”) to physical attacks like pushing and punching. It also includes spreading rumors, threats, name calling, and sexual harassment. When bullies use technology (say, by posting rumors on Facebook or sending hurtful text messages), it’s called *cyberbullying*. Usually, bullying is an ongoing problem rather than a one-time thing. Also, a bully typically has an advantage over his victim. For example, he might be more popular or physically stronger. Any form of bullying—verbal or physical—should be taken seriously.



Q I've been hearing a lot about bullying lately. Is it more common these days?

A Technology like text messaging and social networking has made it easier for tweens to continue harassing each other outside of school. Also, the problem is getting more attention as we learn about its serious consequences

for both bullies and victims. For instance, a child who bullies is more likely to get into trouble with the law as an adult. And being a victim can lead to increased school absences, falling grades, depression, low self-esteem, and dropping out. In some tragic cases, bullying has been tied to school violence and even suicide.

Q What motivates a bully?

A Experts used to believe that most bullies had low self-esteem and that they hurt others to feel better about themselves. While

this does happen, popular children can also be bullies. They're motivated by social power, and they take advantage of less popular children to gain even more power. For example, a well-liked middle schooler might decide who gets invited to parties or where other kids can sit at lunch. If a classmate doesn't do what she says, she might push or threaten the other child or call her names.

Q Now that my son is in middle school, he doesn't confide in me very often. How will I know if he is bullied?

A It's not unusual for children to keep bullying a secret. That's because they're afraid the bully will punish them for telling or because they're ashamed of themselves for being picked on. Try bringing up the subject with your son. You might show him a newspaper or magazine article about bullying. Mention that it's a common problem, and ask if it's going on at his school and whether he feels safe. Also, know the risk factors—children are bullied for being overweight, having a disability, or seeming different, or because of their sexual orientation. Finally, be aware of warning signs. A victim might begin to spend more time alone, ask to stay home from school, or even experiment with dangerous behaviors (drinking alcohol, using drugs, having sex). If you suspect your youngster is being picked on, talk to the school counselor for advice.



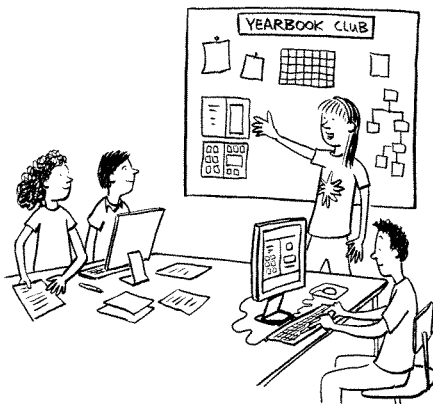
Q What should my child do if she sees someone being bullied?

A Bullies love a crowd, so the best thing your middle grader can do is to pay attention to the victim and ignore the bully. If someone is being physically attacked, your youngster should tell the nearest adult. If a classmate is being teased, she might walk up and give the victim an excuse to escape (“Hey, we gotta go” or “Mrs. Jackson needs to see you in her office”). Keep in mind that it’s normal to be afraid to step in. It’s important for your youngster to remember that a child who is being bullied is probably scared and upset and wants help.

Q My son’s school counselor called and said he’s part of a group that’s bullying a boy in the cafeteria. We have a meeting at school this week. How should we react?

A First, get your son’s side of the story. Tell him about the phone call, and ask for an explanation. If he admits to participating in bullying, let him know that his behavior is unacceptable, and tell him what the consequence will be at home (the school will likely have its own consequence). Also, help your child become more empathetic. Talk regularly about others’ feelings (“Your sister is disappointed that she didn’t make the drill team, so let’s try to cheer her up”), and consider getting involved in community service as a family.

Q My daughter has been unhappy lately. She finally told me it’s because some of her friends have become more popular, and now they say she isn’t “cool enough” for them. Is there anything I can do?



A You can explain to your daughter that friendships change as kids get older. But let her know that you understand it doesn’t make things easier now. Although she might not be able to change these girls’ behavior, she

can seek out other friends. For instance, she might join an after-school activity (yearbook, field hockey) where she can find classmates who share her interests. In the meantime, ask a librarian to help you find books about tweens who struggle



to make friends. Knowing that other middle schoolers go through the same thing can help her feel less alone, and she might learn about strategies for building friendships.

Q My son doesn’t want to go to school because kids tease him about his learning disability. And he doesn’t want me to talk to his teachers or school counselor about it. How can I help him?

A Let your son know this isn’t something he should have to handle alone. Perhaps he’ll let you write an email to his school counselor that doesn’t name the bullies but asks for help. (“What resources do you have for children who are bullied?”) The counselor’s reply might help him feel comfortable sharing. Also, since most bullying takes place when adults aren’t looking, encourage your son to stay with a friend or a group in “hot spots” like the bus, bathroom, cafeteria, or hallways. *Tip:* Have him practice assertive body language (standing up straight, looking others in the eye). This can send the message to the bullies that he isn’t an easy target.



Q A classmate has been spreading rumors about my daughter on Facebook. What can we do?

A The first step is to help your daughter block the student from her account. Although this won’t stop the bully from posting rumors on other people’s pages, knowing that your child is ignoring her might encourage her to stop. That’s because cyberbullies enjoy the drama of posting and getting reactions. If the problem continues, you might consider contacting the bully’s parents if you feel comfortable doing so. Or the school counselor might suggest peer mediation. In the meantime, keeping an eye on your daughter’s online activities can help protect her. Try putting your computer in a common area so you can see what she’s doing. Some parents insist that their child “friend” them as a condition of joining a social networking site. Finally, remind your daughter never to share her password with anyone.

Middle Years

Homework 101

Middle school means more classes to juggle—and more homework assignments to manage. Help your youngster learn more and be successful in school by getting into a good homework routine from the start. Here's how.



1. Make homework a habit

One of the best ways to make something a habit is to do it at the same time every day. Help your middle grader pick a homework time slot that works for him. It could be after dinner or right after he gets home from school. Have him experiment to find the best time and then stick with it daily—even if he has no assignments due the next day. He can use the time to review notes or textbook chapters for a test or to work on a long-term project.

2. Get focused

Encourage your youngster to pick a homework spot where she won't be distracted by siblings or television. She might work best sitting at a desk, spreading her work out on the kitchen table, or lying on her bedroom floor. Being comfortable with her work environment will let her focus on her assignments. *Idea:* Consider making homework time a “quiet period” in your house. If you're reading or doing paperwork and your other children are doing their homework or playing quietly, it will be easier for your middle grader to concentrate.

Encourage her to use her student planner to keep track of homework due dates, quizzes and tests, and meetings for group projects. She can check her planner at the end of the day and quickly spot the items she needs to bring home for each assignment. Using a different-colored folder or binder for every subject is another way to make it easy for her to find what she needs.



3. Keep supplies nearby

A handy stash of school supplies will keep homework time moving along smoothly. Have your child fill a box or basket with everything he needs (paper, pencils, scissors, glue, ruler, graph paper, colored pencils, calculator). He might also keep poster board and other materials for projects nearby, as well as reference books like a dictionary, a thesaurus, and an atlas. Remind him to monitor supplies and arrange a time to shop with you for ones that are running low.



5. Manage assignments

Your youngster's workload might be easier to handle if he starts homework time by putting assignments in order. Some children do better knocking out the easiest assignment first and feeling like they have gotten something done. Others manage better by tackling the hardest work first, when they are most alert. Have your youngster try both ways to see which is more successful. Then, suggest that he put each assignment in his planner in the order he will do it. As he completes a task, he can mark it off—and enjoy a sense of accomplishment.

4. Stay organized

In middle school, your youngster has a lot more books and papers to keep straight, so she needs good organization skills.

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6. Create study guides

Worksheets, textbook questions, and other assignments contain information your youngster will need to know for tests. He can stay ahead of the game by making study guides as he does his homework, instead of waiting until just before an exam to study. While working on history, he might keep a running time line that shows dates of important events like battles or presidential elections. For algebra, he could write step-by-step instructions for solving different kinds of equations. Suggest that he keep the guides in a binder or computer folder.

7. Build in breaks

Avoid homework burnout by having your middle schooler take regular breaks. For example, she might spend 45 minutes



reading her novel for English class and then stop for a 10-minute break before studying for her science quiz. She'll get a chance to step away from her assignments while she walks around the

block, strums her guitar, or eats a healthy snack. And clearing her head can help her feel refreshed when she sits back down to work.

8. Plan ahead for projects

Teach your child to tackle a large project by breaking it down into individual steps. For a science fair, tasks might include coming up with an experiment, writing a hypothesis,

conducting the experiment, tabulating results, and making a display board. He can spread the steps out over several weeks in his planner or on a calendar. The project will get done on time—and it won't seem as overwhelming.

9. Be creative

Your child can add some fun to homework time by finding creative ways to complete assignments.



For instance, instead of using flash cards, she might replace the question cards in a game of Trivial Pursuit with questions from her history textbook. Then, she can play the game with you to study for her test. Or if she's allowed to approach a book report any way she wants, she could make a scrapbook based on the characters.

10. Turn it in

Homework is not complete until it's handed in! Encourage your youngster to develop a routine for getting assignments to school and turning them in on the day they're due. While he does homework, he might keep everything in his backpack except the assignment he's working on. When he finishes, and before taking out the next one, he should put the finished work in his bag. If it's big (a poster or a model that he built), he might put it right by the front door. Or he could tape a sign to the inside of the front door saying, "Take Spanish project!"

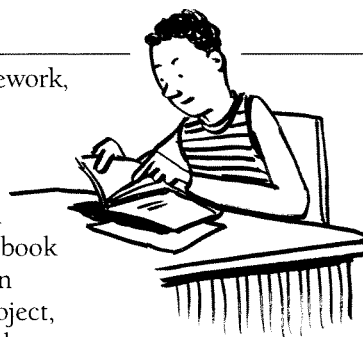
Tip: Be supportive of your child's efforts. Let him know that you expect him to do his homework and that you're proud of him for working hard and finishing.

"Help! I'm stuck!"

When your child asks you for help with homework, what should you do? Instead of finding the answer for him, suggest these ideas that may help him get "unstuck."

● **Look it up.** If he needs help in math, he can work sample problems or flip to the back of the book to see if there are extra practice problems with an answer key. When he's doing a social studies project, he might look through old worksheets to remember terms or facts.

● **Skip ahead.** Have him try the next problem or question. Sometimes, moving forward is enough to help him to remember



forgotten instructions or to find an answer that he overlooked. Then, he can go back and finish the item he skipped.

● **Get outside help.** He could call his school homework line or a friend who is strong in the subject. Also, encourage him to keep a list of helpful websites such as discoveryeducation.com/students and bjpinchbeck.com. The school or public library website might have homework resources, too.

Note: If your middle grader regularly struggles with assignments, contact his teacher for advice.

Middle Years