

Understanding Your Tween



Middle graders push boundaries and shift moods quickly as they seek more independence and deal with changing hormones. This guide offers insight into typical tween behavior to help you navigate (and enjoy!) these years of your child's life and send him off to school ready to learn.

Stay connected

It's normal for tweens to spend time with friends and want privacy. While it's good to give them some space, letting them know you're still there makes them feel secure and loved. Try these tips for keeping in touch with your tween.

Plan ahead. Put family meals on your calendar. Children who eat with their parents on a regular basis are less likely to take risks like trying drugs and alcohol. If you can't have dinner together one night, plan a family breakfast or lunch that day instead. Also, add your tween's school events and activities to the calendar. He'll be happy for you to attend his art show or basketball game—even if he acts like he doesn't care.

Find new ways to talk. Your middle grader might be more apt to open up when she's relaxed or if she's not looking at you directly. Stop by her bedroom to say goodnight and chat for a few minutes. Or invite her to run errands with you, and talk in the car. To start a conversation, try sharing something about your own life—she may share something about hers. If she mentions a concern, such as a test she's nervous

about, listen quietly and ask if she'd like suggestions, rather than jumping into problem-solving mode.

Offer tween-approved affection. Show your child you love him in ways he's comfortable with. He probably won't want hugs or kisses in public, since kids this age worry about looking grown up and tend to be easily embarrassed. Instead, give him a pat on the back or simply wave. Another way to express affection is by leaving messages for him to find, like a sticky note on the bathroom mirror saying, "Looking forward to a fun weekend with you. Love, Mom."

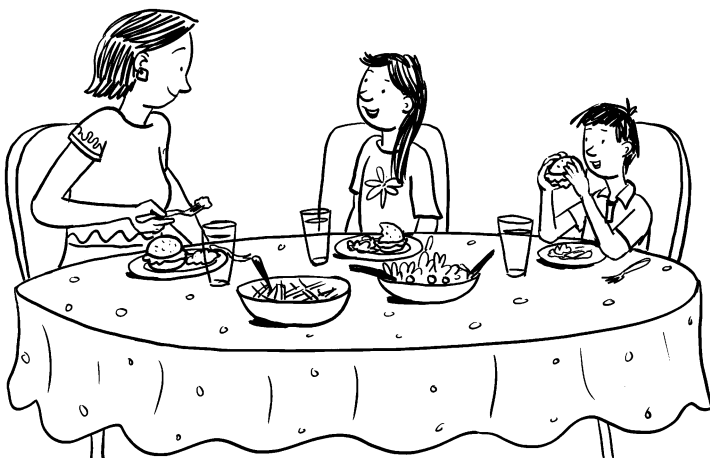
Emphasize empathy

The part of the tween brain that's responsible for reasoning is still developing, so kids this age may not think through the consequences of their words and actions. Tap into your child's sense of empathy, or ability to consider and understand others' feelings, with these ideas.

Imagine being in someone else's shoes.

Ask your middle grader to think about how another person might feel in specific situations. Say she doesn't want to attend her little brother's awards banquet. How would he feel if she stays home—and how would she feel if her brother wasn't there to support her at an important event? Also, let her see other people's perspectives by exposing her to their worlds. You could volunteer together at a homeless shelter or an assisted-living facility.





Use “face” time. Empathy is learned in person, so encourage face-to-face interactions. For example, if your tween is having a disagreement with a friend, suggest that they talk in person rather than texting. They’ll pick up on each other’s tone of voice and facial expressions—and increase their chances of patching things up. At home, set limits on electronics so family members can communicate in real life. Have him keep devices off during meals and when you’re in the car together, for instance.

Point out the power of words. If your child says something hurtful to you, tell her how she made you feel. (“When you say ‘whatever’ or ‘so what,’ I feel like you don’t respect me.”) You’ll help her understand how her words affect others. Then, ask her to think of a more respectful way to express herself.

Boost self-control

Your tween’s ability to control impulses is a work in progress—in fact, this process continues well into young adulthood. In the meantime, middle graders can use strategies like these to keep from acting on impulse. *Bonus:* Kids who demonstrate self-control do better in school and are usually happier overall.

Set yourself up for success. Have your tween adjust his environment in ways that help him stay in control. For instance, he could keep his phone in another room so he’s not tempted to look at it while he does homework. Or maybe he will eat a healthy snack before going out so he’s not likely to get candy from the vending machine.



Practice responses. Suggest that your child think about situations that make her angry, upset, or frustrated. Then, she can plan ways to react. Maybe she gets annoyed when you remind her to practice piano every day. She could set a daily alarm, then politely let you know she’s “got this.” Or if she normally flies off the handle when a younger sibling repeats everything she says, she might decide to just quietly walk away next time. Other strategies include singing her favorite song in her head or silently counting to 10.

Stick with goals. An important part of self-control is thinking about the big picture rather than just the here and now. Say your tween needs to bring up his science grade, but he’d rather hang out with friends than study for a test. He could tack his last report card to his bulletin board and circle the grade he wants to improve. He’ll have a visual reminder to keep his eye on the goal.

Middle Years