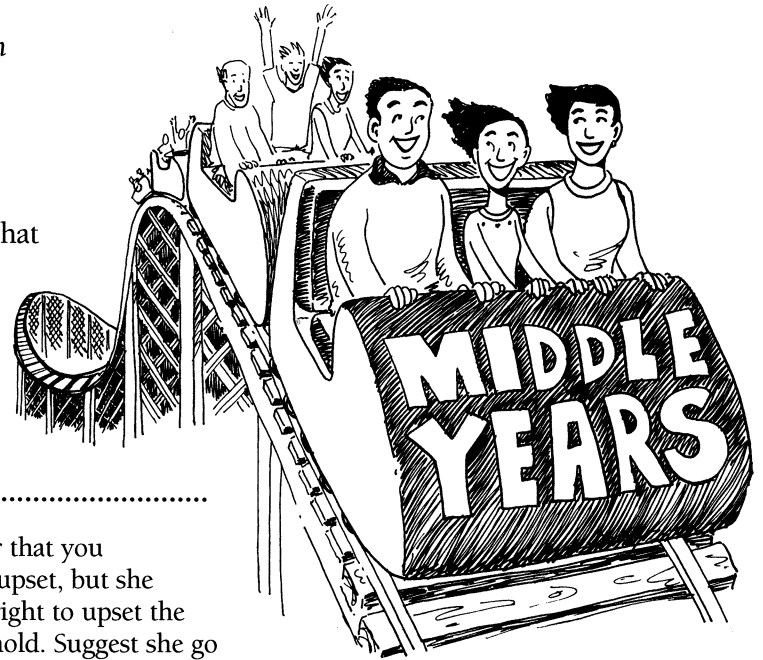


# Understanding your middle grader

*“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, and 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.



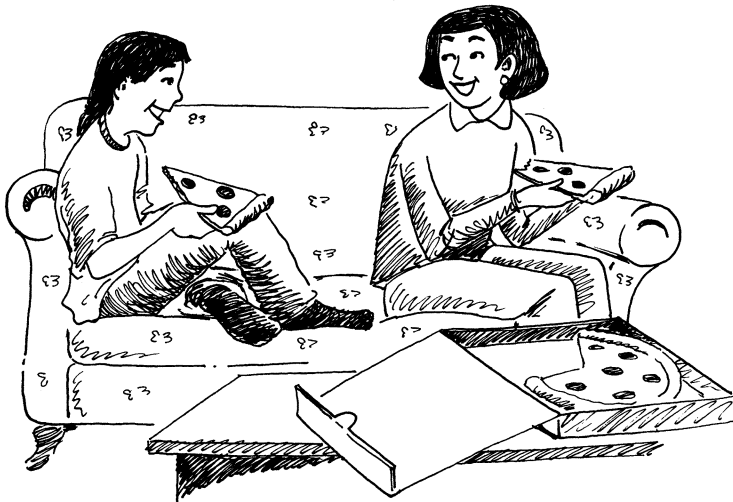
**Suggestions:** The next time your middle grader shouts, “Just leave me alone” and slams the door, consider taking his advice. He may be trying to say, “This room is my private area.” Having a private place can help him cool off and relax.

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.).

*continued*

## Middle Years



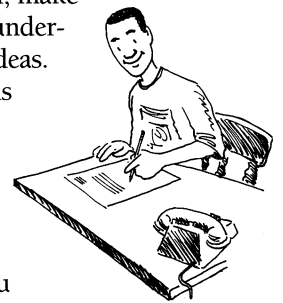
Whenever you want to ask questions about your middle grader's life, try to remain as casual as possible. If your questions are too probing, she's likely to feel attacked, which may make her respond defensively.

## 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 that 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 that 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 new-found 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

# Giving and Getting Respect

Being respectful helps your middle grader get along with family members, teachers, and peers. And this important habit can lead to success in school and in the future. Encourage her to treat others well, use good manners, and follow rules.



## Respect yourself

People who respect themselves believe that others should treat them well. Here are ways your tween can foster self-respect.

**Stay true to yourself.** Your child will earn self-respect by knowing who she is and standing by what she believes in. For instance, if she enjoys time to herself, she shouldn't feel pressured to say yes to every invitation to hang out with friends. If she doesn't think kids should smoke, she shouldn't act like

cigarettes are cool. It might not always be easy, but she'll respect herself more in the long run.

**Do your best.** By working hard in school and at extracurricular activities, your tween demonstrates respect for herself. Explain that you want her to put effort into whatever she does. For instance, doing homework carefully, studying for tests, and practicing her musical instrument regularly all show that she takes pride in her work.



## Respect others

Your middle grader won't agree with everyone all the time. These ideas can help him respect people in different situations.

**Model what you mean.** Your child will learn by following your example. If he is disrespectful, use it as an opportunity to

model respect. Focus on his behavior ("I don't like the way you are speaking to me") rather than on *him* ("You are so rude!"). *Tip:* Reinforce his respectful behavior by pointing it out. For example, if he tells you he was upset when you mentioned his grades in front of his aunt, you might say, "I appreciate your waiting until we got home to tell me. Let's talk about it now."

**Focus on words and actions.** Ask your tween to consider how what he says and does affects others. Does he make people feel respected? For instance, if he gets a grade he doesn't understand, help him practice how to bring it up with his teacher using a respectful tone. ("I'm confused about why I got a C. Do you have time to explain it to me?") Or if he disagrees with a classmate about who should be elected student council president, he could focus on the issues rather than criticizing the candidates. *Idea:* Have him think of people he looks up to and how they talk to and act toward others. They can help him understand what respect looks and sounds like.



*continued*



## Mind your manners

Using basic manners communicates respect. Help your child make a good impression with these tips.

**Practice everyday manners.** Prepare your youngster for common situations by practicing polite behavior. For example, act out how to introduce someone. (“Natalie, this is Jack. Jack, Natalie.”) Or he can work on accepting compliments gracefully by smiling and saying, “Thank you.”

**Discuss etiquette challenges.** Brainstorm situations your tween might find himself in where he’s unsure what to do. Talk about what to do if someone gives him a birthday

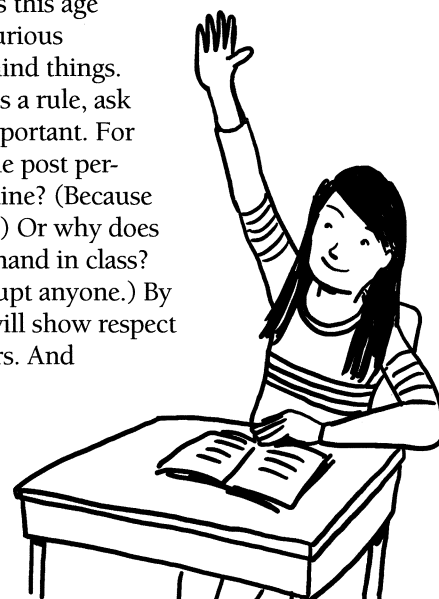
present and he already has the item. Explain that it’s possible to be both honest *and* polite by making a nice comment. (“This is my favorite color. Thanks!”) Or if he gets a phone call when he’s in line to order food, he could step outside to answer or return the call later.

## Follow the rules

Abiding by rules shows respect for authority and can help your middle grader stay safe and get along with others.

**Hold your child accountable.** Show your tween that you take school and household rules seriously by expecting her to follow them. For example, if the school dress code says no tank tops, don’t allow her to wear them. The more you stand by rules, the more likely she is to respect them as well.

**Explain rules.** Kids this age are often genuinely curious about the reasons behind things. If your child questions a rule, ask why she thinks it’s important. For instance, why can’t she post personal information online? (Because strangers could see it.) Or why does she have to raise her hand in class? (So she doesn’t interrupt anyone.) By following rules, she will show respect for teachers and others. And when people feel respected, they are more likely to respect her in return.



## Be a good sport

Student athletes who treat opponents, teammates, coaches, and officials with dignity show good character—and earn respect as a result. Share these ways your child can demonstrate respect on the field or court:

- Play by the rules, regardless of whether your actions can be seen by coaches or officials.
- Avoid “trash talking” to intimidate or put down opponents.
- Accept officials’ calls graciously, even if you don’t agree with them.



You can also set an example of respectful behaviors for your tween when you’re watching a sporting event with these tips:

- Offer encouragement (“Way to go!”), and refrain from booing or making negative remarks.
- Be polite to opposing teams and their fans. For example, say hello, or congratulate them on a win.
- Discuss concerns with your youngster’s coach privately, rather than in front of other players.

## Middle Years