

How Can I be a Good Parent to my Tween?

by

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Parents often become less involved in the lives of their children as they enter middle school, but your young adolescent needs as much attention and love as he needed when he was younger—and maybe more.

Your relationship with your child may change and *should* change as he develops the skills required to become a successful adult. These changes can be rewarding and welcome. As your middle school child makes mental and emotional leaps, your conversations will grow richer. As his interests develop and deepen, he may begin to teach *you*—how to slug a baseball, what is happening with the city council or why a new book is worth reading.

America is home to people with a great variety of attitudes, opinions and values. Americans have different ideas and priorities, which can affect how we choose to raise our children. Across these differences, however, research has shown that being an effective parent to a “tweener” involves the following qualities:

Showing love. When your child behaves badly, you may become angry or upset with him. You may also feel miserable when you become angry or upset, but these feelings are different from not loving your children. Young adolescents need adults who are there for them—people who connect with them, communicate with them, spend time with them and show a genuine interest in them. This is how they learn to care for and love others.

Providing support. Young adolescents need support as they struggle with problems that may seem unimportant to their parents and families. They need praise when they have done their best. They need encouragement to develop interests and personal characteristics.

Setting limits. Young adolescents need parents or other adults who consistently provide structure and supervision that is firm and appropriate for age and development. Setting limits keeps all children, including young teens, physically and emotionally safe.

Research identifies three types of parents: **authoritarian, permissive and authoritative**. Research shows that to be effective parents, it is best to avoid extremes. **Authoritarian** parents who lay down hard-and-fast rules and expect their children to always do as they are told or **permissive** parents who have very few rules or regulations and give their children too much freedom are most likely to have the most difficult time as parents. Their children are at risk for a range of negative behavioral and emotional consequences. However, **authoritative** parents, who set limits that are clear and come with explanations, tend to struggle less with their adolescents.

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Being a role model. Young adolescents need strong role models. Try to live the behavior and values that you hope your child will develop. Your actions speak louder than words. If you set high standards for yourself and treat others with kindness and respect, your child stands a better chance of following your example. As adolescents explore possibilities of who they may become, they look to their parents, peers, well-known personalities and others to emulate.

Teaching responsibility. We are not born knowing how to act responsibly. A sense of responsibility is formed over time. As children grow up, they need to learn to take more and more responsibility for such things as:

- Completing chores, such as doing yard work, cleaning their rooms or helping to prepare meals, that contribute to the family's well being
- Completing homework assignments without being nagged
- Taking on community activities
- Finding ways to be useful to others
- Admitting to both the good and bad choices that they make.

Providing a range of experiences. Adolescence is a time for exploring many areas and doing new things. Your child may try new sports or academic pursuits and read new books. He may experiment with different forms of art, learn about different cultures and careers or take part in community or religious activities. Within your means, you can open doors for your child by introducing him to new people and to new worlds. In doing so, you may renew in yourself long-ignored interests and talents, which also can set a good example for your child. Do not be discouraged when his interests change.

Showing respect. It is tempting to label all young adolescents as being difficult and rebellious, but these youngsters vary as much as do children in any other age group do. Your child needs to be treated with respect, which requires you to recognize and appreciate her differences and to treat her as an individual. Respect also requires you to show compassion by trying to see things from your child's point of view and to consider her needs and feelings. By treating your young teen with respect, you help her to take pleasure in good behavior.

There are no perfect parents and a bad decision or an "off" day (or week or month!) is not likely to have any lasting impact on your child. What is most important in being an effective parent is what you do over time – creating a loving and supportive, yet authoritative environment in which your child can grow and thrive.

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