

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 going on. The answer is simple. Your child is becoming an adolescent. Middle graders tend to be very moody. One minute they're happy, 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 him or her to control her emotions. So, what do you do? First, keep in mind that his or 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 him or her that you understand she's upset, but he or she doesn't have the right to upset the rest of the household. Suggest that he or she go to another room if he or she is not feeling sociable. When he or she comes out, try to forget anything happened. He or 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 or

her advice. He or she 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 or her need for privacy and expect the same treatment in return. Chances are he or she will understand where you're coming from. Allowing your child to have privacy doesn't mean he or she has complete control over the room, however. Let him or her know your expectations on how the room is to be kept (dirty clothes in laundry basket, no trash on floor, etc.).

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 or she 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 or her to open up about his or her emotions. Make your comments in a matter-of fact tone. Middle graders are likely to find joking irritating even if you're just trying to be funny. Talk about how you felt when you were his or her age. If he or she doesn't believe you, pull out old photos. He or she will quickly see you're telling the truth. Gently explain that his or her friends probably feel the same way about their bodies. Let him or her know that these changes will be less and less as he or she gets older.

Independent

Your middle grader seems unhappy, so you ask him or her what's wrong. "Nothing," he or she replies. Then, he or she spends an hour on the phone telling a friend about his or 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 him or her. Now he or 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 to depend less on parents to meet all their needs. **Suggestions:** The key to this stage of your child's life is to allow him or her to make more decisions about how and when he or she does things. But make it clear that his or her

newfound freedom has conditions. For example, so long as his or her work gets done you'll stay out of his or her hair. But if he or she stops meeting his or her obligations, remind him or her that you'll step in and take over. When you ask questions about your middle grader's life, try to remain as casual as possible. If your questions are 100% probing, he or she is likely to feel attacked, which may make him or 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. His or her mind has begun to reason, make decisions, and understand abstract ideas. Disagreeing is a great way for him or her to think out loud. He or she is trying to separate him- or herself from you and prove he or she can do things his or 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. He or she is learning to defend him or her argument, a valuable skill he or she will need to resist peer pressure. Likewise, he or she is trying to sort out what he or she likes and dislikes, from hairstyles to values. It's also a way for him or her to learn the thinking behind your rules. He or she is testing you to see why you hold certain beliefs. However, it's important that your child remain respectful when expressing his or her views. Explain that just because he or she disagrees with an idea doesn't mean he or 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.

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