

# Ten Tips for Successfully Parenting a Middle Schooler

By Sue Acuña and Cynthia Tobias

## 1. Find ways to make physical contact.

Middle schoolers often avoid their parents' hugs and kisses—especially in public. But you can and should stay in touch without making it a big deal by bumping shoulders when walking or sitting on the floor and leaning against your teen's legs. High fives and fist bumps are acceptable, and a side-arm hug is sometimes tolerated. Requiring a good night hug or kiss is usually okay, as long as friends aren't around, and it's a good reminder that your love is there no matter what.

## 2. Listen without solving problems.

Middle schoolers don't need you to automatically fix everything for them. What they want most is someone who actually listens and tries to understand how they feel. Remember they are beginning the journey to becoming an adult, and this is a good time to give them some practice in being treated like one. In fact, this is a great time for parents to practice empathy instead of interrupting with solutions. (That will take a little extra patience on the parents' part!)

## 3. Protect your teen's dignity.

Between crashing into things and speaking without thinking, middle schoolers have many opportunities for awkwardness and embarrassment. Wise parents either pretend not to notice or offer understated help: "Ouch! You okay?" is better than "Oh, Sweetie! Did you hurt anything? Do you need an ice pack or a Band-Aid?" And *never* share an embarrassing story about your teen in front of anyone.

## 4. Resist the urge to rescue.

Allowing middle schoolers to experience natural consequences (a missed game due to a forgotten uniform, e.g.) isn't mean or heartless—it's part of the process of helping a teen grow up. Most parents don't replace or recover misplaced items for their adult children, but an 18-year-old doesn't suddenly wake up one morning as an independent adult. Successful parents will let their teens learn through their mistakes rather than bailing them out every time they forget something.



## 5. Use authentic, appropriate praise.

Not all praise is created equal. Praise that's shallow, general, and given too frequently, like "Nice job," "I'm proud of you," and "You're so awesome," is much less effective than praise that's specific, authentic, and timely. "You worked hard on that project and deserved that grade" and "Doing your chores without being asked demonstrates how mature you are" are good examples of genuine and effective praise.

# Ten Tips for Successfully Parenting a Middle Schooler (continued)

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## 6. Allow kids to be disappointed or sad or upset.

Parents who don't allow their teens to suffer disappointment can give their children the mistaken idea that life will always go their way. When teens don't make the team or aren't chosen for an award, parents should resist the temptation to go in and complain or try to change the results. They should focus instead on teaching teens how to *handle* disappointment.

## 7. Listen to the whole story and get both sides.

Parents can be quick to jump in on the wrong side, whether it's in their teen's favor or against it. Be sure to get all the facts before rushing in asking for someone's head to roll. For example, many bullying situations are not what they first appear to be. While it may look as if the bigger, tougher kid is picking on a smaller one, sometimes it's the younger one who's been harassing the bigger one for weeks until the bigger one finally reaches the breaking point.

## 8. Discipline without fear.

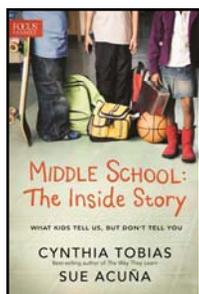
One frustrated mom was advised to confiscate her daughter's phone for a week as a consequence for disrespect. "Oh, no," said the horrified mom. "I couldn't do that – she'd be too mad to live with!" Some parents operate under the fear that their children will hate them forever if they discipline them in a way that angers them. The reality is, sometimes your discipline is going to make your teens mad. But if you always let them have their own way, *no one* is going to benefit.

## 9. Play it cool, no matter what.

When faced with an emotional teen, don't overreact. Instead, reply calmly and ask more questions. Teen moods pass quickly, so don't get sucked into either a very good or a very bad mood. Be the stabilizing force by taking the middle ground and keeping your voice and your face neutral. Things will blow over more quickly, and your teen will appreciate your calm response.

## 10. Say I love you even if it's rejected.

Middle schoolers can be prickly and unapproachable, but that doesn't change their need for love and acceptance. Say "I love you" at least once a day, whether you feel like it or not. Don't be discouraged or disappointed if you get a shrug or a grunt in reply – or if you're totally ignored. The message will come through, even when it doesn't seem like it, and those will be words you'll never regret.



Read *Middle School: The Inside Story*

By Cynthia Tobias & Sue Acuña

