

Welcome to the Middle School Zone

Your child is changing.
Is your parenting?

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"I'd love to help chaperone your field trip, Mrs. Acuña, but I've been forbidden to go," Colin's mom said sadly. "Apparently my son has reached the age where it's embarrassing to have your mom around. Guess I'll go hang out with my second-grader while he still loves me."

Have you been caught off guard by changes in your child that mark the transition from childhood into early adolescence? You thought you had more time, but suddenly your 10- or 11-year-old is less like the child you know and more like someone you don't even recognize. Welcome to the middle school zone—even if your child isn't actually in middle school yet.

Most parents don't know what's "normal" at this stage. A middle schooler may act like a young adult one minute, and then revert to childish behaviors the next. Middle schoolers want to be understood, but they don't have any better idea than their parents about what's going on with their bodies, emotions or much else in this new stage of their lives.

These are critical and often challenging years; kids who have strong relationships with their parents during early adolescence have an easier time maintaining that connection during the high school years, when it's more difficult to establish trust and rapport. Here are some practical ways to nurture a strong, positive relationship with your middle schooler:

Rethink authority

“My parents want to control everything about my life. They tell me what to wear and what to eat and when to go to bed. Why can’t I make any of my own decisions?”

From the time our kids are born, we manage virtually everything for them. Bedtimes, menus, wardrobe—we make all these decisions. But once children reach 10 or 11 years old, this is no longer acceptable to them, leading to power struggles.

The fact that your children need you will not change. But *how* they need you constantly changes, especially during their journey from childhood to young adulthood. Early adolescence may be the time to transition from your role as “manager” to the role of “consultant.” You’re still in charge, but how you communicate your authority may make all the difference in



how much cooperation you receive. Instead of delivering commands or ultimatums, try asking questions and making gentle suggestions. For example, “You’re not wearing that to school!” will likely lead to a battle. Instead, try, “You haven’t worn that in a while, have you? Doesn’t fit quite the way it used to. Go look in the mirror, and let’s talk about it.” Then you might ease sideways into a discussion about the appropriateness of what your child is wearing, especially if it’s gotten too tight or small.

Sometimes a consultant has to let the client make bad choices and live with the consequences. If it’s not a major issue of safety or morality, consider how much control you really need to hang onto. Try just listening and making a suggestion, and then step back to let your “client” make the final decision.



Acknowledge their fears

All the girls loved Mr. D., the basketball coach, and enjoyed signing a card to give to him at the end of the year. But when the question came up of who would present the card to him in front of the team, there were no volunteers. “I can’t get up in front of everybody,” one girl said. “What if I say something stupid?”

We asked middle schoolers to list their top fears. At first, they rattled off a standard list including parents dying, natural disasters, kidnappings and school shootings. But as we dug deeper, another list emerged, made up of fears that middle schoolers often *don’t* share with adults—or even each other—because they think they’re alone in feeling that way. At the top of that list? Looking stupid.

For middle schoolers, the fear of looking foolish—especially when they run the risk of being ridiculed by peers and not welcomed into the crowd—is one of the scariest things of all. They know that terrorist attacks and



school shootings are rare, but not fitting in? That could happen to them tomorrow in the lunchroom!

What can you do about the fact that your middle schooler is more scared of being a social misfit than of facing a terrorist attack? First, don't downplay their fear; it really is a paralyzing force in middle school. Keep in mind that middle schoolers want to be heard and understood, and use genuine empathy to acknowledge that these years can be difficult for everyone,

but things *will* get better. Because middle schoolers suffer from extreme self-consciousness, even a small lapse in judgment can cause them embarrassment. To have a parent broadcasting that to anyone will leave a middle schooler writhing in agony or seething in anger. Just as we trust spouses and friends to keep confidences and not embarrass us, middle schoolers need to trust their parents will do the same.

And while reminding them how valuable they are may not change how they feel, consistently demonstrating the unconditional love that you—and God—have for them positively impacts how they see themselves.

Find 10 additional tips for parenting middle schoolers in our digital edition.

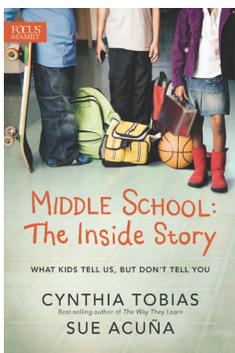
It's typical for middle schoolers to hear only the part of the conversation that applies to them. We call this "the Bubble," and our advice to parents is to get used to it because it's not going away any time soon. The Bubble is a survival technique that gives middle schoolers time and space to deal with . . . well, themselves.

Their physical changes are what we can see. But big changes are happening inside, too. Emotionally, middle schoolers feel like they have little control over mood swings. Intellectually, they're thinking all sorts of new thoughts about who they are and where they fit into the big picture. Spiritually, they're beginning to question some of what they used to take for granted. Between studying themselves in the mirror and reflecting on all that's going on inside their hearts and heads, is it any wonder they barely notice the rest of us?

So are you just supposed to let them get away with going off into their own private world and

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For more on parenting middle schoolers, read *Middle School: The Inside Story*.

Find it at ThrivingFamily.com/books.

Step inside "the Bubble"

- "I want to pray for my grandma; she's having surgery."
- "When, and what for?"
- "I'm not sure."
- "Will she stay in the hospital?"
- "I have no idea."
- "How do you know she's having surgery?"
- "My mom said I'd have to ride home with my friend on the day of the surgery."



On the Aug. 7 Focus on the Family broadcast, Cynthia Tobias talks about how to help kids thrive in middle school.

ignoring the rest of us? Not completely. And not forever. But right now it's their main method of self-protection. You can't live inside your child's Bubble—it's strictly single-occupancy—but you should definitely be a regular visitor. Your child still needs you, in some ways more than ever.

Keep gently poking your head into the Bubble. Don't go in to yell

at your son about the mess he left behind after lunch. Instead, invite him to join you in the kitchen and see if he can figure out why you're there. He'll probably be surprised to see the open cupboard door, the open peanut butter jar and the open bread wrapper. Chances are good that once he does see them, he'll clean them up without further prompting. When you give

your daughter important information—"Dad will pick you up at 1 for an orthodontist appointment. Don't forget your homework assignment."—have her repeat it back to you. That way, you'll know your words penetrated her Bubble. When she inconsiderately interrupts your conversation, point it out by saying, "I'm sure you didn't mean to interrupt the important conversation I'm having." She'll probably be surprised to see there's someone else talking to you!

Like a roller-coaster ride, the middle school years will have periods of turbulence followed by calmer spots. Our suggestion is to hold your middle schooler's hand during the scary parts, high-five him during the exciting parts and try not to be caught off guard by the twists and turns. Though middle schoolers may act like they don't want parents around, they are relieved to know we're close by to be their stabilizers during the ups and downs of adolescence. Eventually, the track will smooth out, and everyone can take a deep breath and say, "Phew! We made it!" **TF**

*Adapted from Middle School: The Inside Story.
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MAKING AN IMPACT

"I am a single mother of a 13-year-old boy whose life was saved through a pregnancy resource center that Focus on the Family supports. Now that he's a teenager, he's become interested in some games and trading cards that concern me. While praying in his room this morning, I asked the Lord for wisdom. On your website [FocusOnTheFamily.com], I found all the information I needed! You not only played a part in saving my son's life before he was born, but now you are helping me raise him. God bless you and all you do!"

—Cathy from California