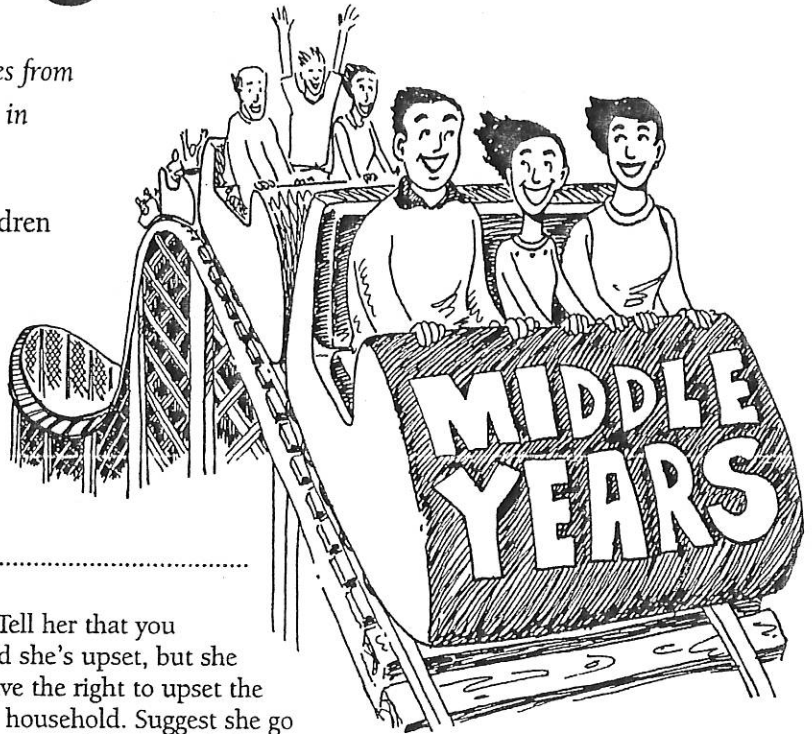


Understanding your middle grader

"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, 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.

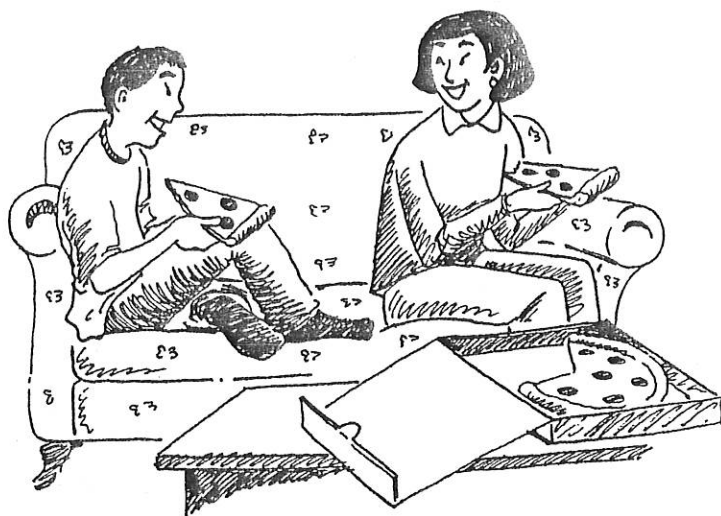
If you haven't already established rules such as "Knock before opening a closed door," consider doing so. Tell your middle grader that you respect his need for privacy and expect the same treatment in return. Chances are he'll understand where you're coming from.

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



Sensitive

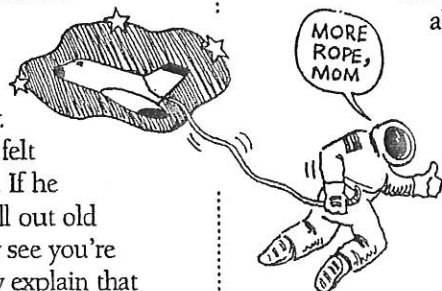
"I don't want anyone at the restaurant to see me. I hate the way I look."

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 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 newfound 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.

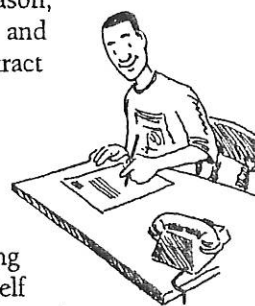
Whenever you want to ask questions about your middle grader's life, try to remain as casual as possible. If your questions are too probing, she's likely to feel attacked, which may make her respond defensively.

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 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.

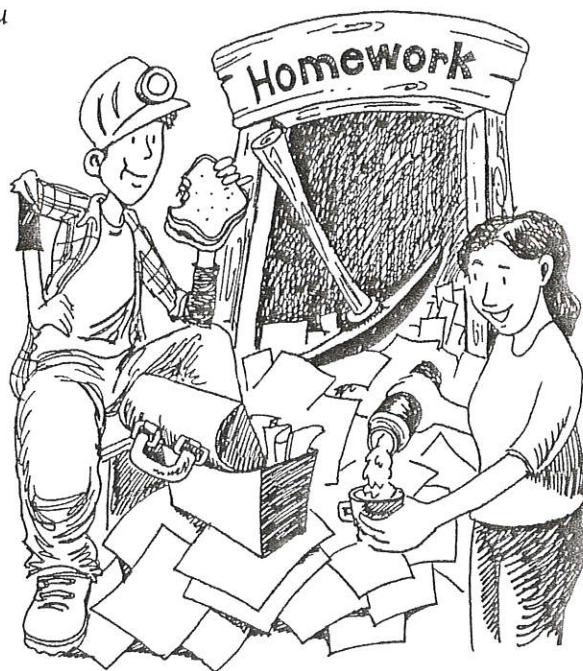
Middle Years

Whose homework is this, anyway?

You know your middle grader's report is due tomorrow, but you haven't seen him open the book yet. What about that battery-operated volcano for science class? The supplies are still in the wrapper.

You know that homework is an important part of learning, but how involved should you be? Too much concern may cause kids to depend too heavily on their parents. Too little concern may let academic problems go unnoticed.

This report will show parents and middle graders how to work together for study success—and avoid the question, “Whose homework is this, anyway?”



What your middle grader can do

Homework improves grades, provides practice for study skills, and increases learning. That's why it's important for students to complete their homework. Here's how your middle grader can get the job done.

Get assignments

Remind your child that it's her job to write down assignments. She may need to copy them from the blackboard. (Some schools post assignments on Web sites or record them on homework hotlines.) Before your middle grader leaves class, she should know when assignments are due and if she needs extra resources (Internet, library research) or special supplies (index cards, poster board, etc.).

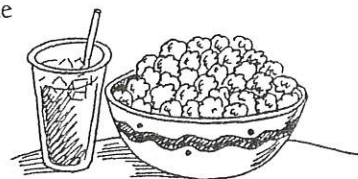


Make a plan

When your middle grader gets home from school, he should glance over assignments and come up with a study plan. Generally it's a good idea to tackle tougher or longer assignments first. He should be able to follow most homework and project instructions without supervision, but let him know you're available if he needs you. For long-term projects, he may want to keep track of deadlines on a calendar.

Keep a routine

Encourage your child to begin homework at the same time each day to make learning a habit. What time is best? Possibilities include immediately after school or later in the evening when she's had a chance to relax. If she's involved in outside activities, she might do better with a flexible schedule that allows her to study after school on some days and after dinner on others. Within reason, let her decide.



Create a study area

Many children work best in a special study area, like at a bedroom desk or the kitchen table. However, some kids do better sprawling on the living room floor. Consider letting your middle grader choose where he'll work—he's more likely to stay on task when he's comfortable. His work area should have adequate lighting and a stash of homework supplies, such as pens, pencils, paper, and a dictionary.

continued



Increase concentration

Some middle graders need calm surroundings to focus on homework. Others may study better with low-volume background music. But television is usually too much for anyone to ignore. Your child should keep the TV off during study time so her mind is tuned in to her homework.

Find ways to improve

When graded homework is returned to your child, have him read any comments the teacher wrote. If he received a poor grade, he should think about the reasons. Did he write down the assignment correctly? Did he follow the instructions? Discovering what went wrong can keep him from repeating mistakes.

What you can do

The key is for you to stay involved and monitor your child's homework without doing it for her. Consider these suggestions.

Offer support

When your middle grader asks you questions, guide her in the right direction. For example, instead of answering her question, "Mom, how many feet are in a mile?" ask, "Where do you think you can find the answer?" Your role is to show her how to resolve problems so she will learn to do it on her own. You can also help by quizzing her on test questions or discussing essay topics.

Maintain a schedule

Whenever possible, match your household's schedule with your child's study time. If homework is done from 6 to 7 p.m. each day, make this a quiet time for the entire family. Consider working on your own project (read a book or balance the checkbook) while he studies. This will help him stay focused.

Give reminders

An occasional prompt, such as "How's the draft of your report coming along?" may be all that's needed to encourage your middle grader to complete a project. Nagging will only make your child more resistant. But watch for signs that he's frustrated or seems to be spending too much time on his homework. If your child consistently has trouble with assignments, ask his teachers for advice.



Promote independence

When your child was younger, she probably readily handed over her homework for you to read. Middle graders are more independent. If your child asks you to read her assignment, point out spelling or other errors, but let her correct them. The teacher needs to see her problem areas. And, to avoid a flare-up of hurt feelings, don't criticize her work.



Provide praise

If you notice your middle grader studying hard, tell him how proud you are. Praising strong effort encourages your child to keep learning. A warm comment, such as "Nice job on that science project," can give him confidence when he dives into social studies.

Stay positive

Try to keep a positive, upbeat attitude about your middle grader's homework—your child just might follow your lead. Remind her to take an occasional short break to make homework more pleasant. She could take a 10-minute walk, have a snack, or listen to a couple of her favorite songs. But be sure she gets back on track after the break.

Team with teachers

Ask your child's teachers about homework rules and how you can help with assignments. Find out what kinds of projects your child should expect. Provide your phone number, and e-mail address if available, and encourage the teachers to contact you if problems arise. The sooner you are aware of a problem, the more quickly a solution can be found.



Remember: With your guidance and encouragement, your middle grader will learn to work independently.

Middle Years