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**South Brunswick Public Schools
EPIC Program**



Common Discipline Problems Of Middle School Children And How to Solve Them

One of a series of Parent Guides from



Parent Guide

Common Discipline Problems Of Middle School Children

And How to Solve Them

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Table of Contents

Introduction2
Five Unwavering Truths About Discipline2
Discipline Dilemma #1: Arguing . . . . .	.3
Discipline Dilemma #2: Chores . . . . .	.3
Discipline Dilemma #3: Moodiness . . . . .	.4
Discipline Dilemma #4: Homework Headaches . . . . .	.5
Discipline Dilemma #5: Independence . . . . .	.5
Natural vs. Logical Consequences . . . . .	.6
Appropriate Consequences . . . . .	.6
Try a Little Togetherness . . . . .	.6
Technology Tamers . . . . .	.7
Drugs and Alcohol: The Red Flags . . . . .	.7
Where to Go for Help . . . . .	.7
For More Information . . . . .	.8
Other Parent Guides Available From The Parent Institute . . . . .	.9

Introduction

Question: What do you call a child who is both fiercely independent and surprisingly clingy? Who goes from cool self-assurance to paralyzing self-doubt in the same afternoon? Who is perhaps more in need of guidance and discipline than ever before?

Answer: a middle schooler.

What makes middle schoolers so challenging (and fascinating) is that they straddle two worlds. In one, they're still children, so they need enormous amounts of love, support and attention. In the other, they're becoming teenagers—which means they also seek independence and room to mature.

This paradox—the push-and-pull of their constantly wanting and not wanting you—makes disciplining (and, frankly, living with) middle schoolers a real struggle at times. But it also makes this one of the most exhilarating stages of your child's life. He's growing up, and you get to come along for the ride.

Of course, there will be bumps in the road—especially where discipline is concerned. What follows are some of the most common middle school-related discipline issues, along with ideas for handling them as you help your own preteen navigate the often choppy waters of adolescence.

**Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*



Five Unwavering Truths About Discipline

1. Discipline means “to teach”—it does not mean “to punish.” Accordingly, it should be done out of love.
2. Consistency is key. No matter what approach you take to discipline, it's crucial to be consistent about it. In other words, this morning's rules should also apply this afternoon.
3. Be patient. No discipline strategy works all the time—but that doesn't mean the strategy isn't working overall.
4. Children need and want limits. Effective discipline doesn't stifle kids—it gives them a strong, dependable foundation from which to grow and mature.
5. Discipline isn't just about correcting what your child does wrong—it's about celebrating what he does right. The more you praise and reinforce the good things he does, the more he'll want to do the right things.

Discipline Dilemma #1: Arguing

Smart Solution: Here's a new twist on an old joke: If a middle schooler's mother says something in the woods, but there's no one there to hear her, is she still wrong? Ask a preteen, and the answer is a resounding "Yes!" Once upon a time, Mom and Dad had all the answers. Now, they can't be trusted to come in out of the rain.

Tell your middle schooler that the sky's blue, and she'll deny it. Suggest that cornflakes and chocolate frosting don't constitute a healthy breakfast, and she'll debate the issue until lunch. Ask whether she's too hot or too cold, and she'll chastise you for only offering two choices.

Ah, adolescence—when kvetching becomes an Olympic event. To maintain your sanity in the face of an argumentative middle schooler, try these strategies:

- Don't take the bait. Your child may be chomping at the bit for an argument, but that doesn't mean you need to play along. When she says something intentionally provocative, respond with a simple, "That's interesting," and walk away. Remember: It takes two to tango.
- Resist the urge to get your point across during an argument. If she's looking for a sparring match, she's likely not listening to you anyway. If you want her to hear you, save your conversation for a calmer moment.
- Avoid the knee-jerk "No." If you reflexively nix each request as it leaves her lips, you're inviting arguments. Instead, don't assume that what she's about to say is unreasonable or belligerent. For a few moments, at least, hear her out.

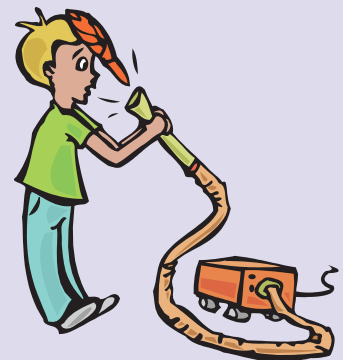
Discipline Dilemma #2: Chores

Smart Solution: What phrase will your middle schooler never utter? "Why, yes, Dad. I would like to vacuum the basement. Thanks for asking!" Alas, if he responds to your request at all (assuming he hasn't been stricken with selective deafness), it will undoubtedly be to explain—at length—why the basement carpeting not only isn't dirty now, but may never require vacuuming again.

Kind of makes you nostalgic for the toddler days when he longed to help you do everything, doesn't it?

But, willing or not, it's important that your middle schooler continue pitching in around the house. Not only will it teach him responsibility, it'll also show him that he's part of something larger—the family. This is especially valuable now, since preteens are notoriously self-absorbed. Here are some tips for minimizing those "I'd rather die than mop" battles:

- Give him some control. As a family, sit down and decide who should do what. Does he like mowing the lawn but hate emptying the trash? Let him make his case, and then divvy up the work accordingly.
- Set clear consequences. If his backpack is supposed to be picked up by 4:00 p.m., but it's still sitting on the living room floor at 5:00 p.m., consider docking part of his allowance (for example, twenty-five cents for every hour a chore remains undone).
- Be consistent and firm. If he goes to bed without feeding the cat, wake him up to do it. If he can't manage to put his dirty clothes in the hamper, don't wash them.



Discipline Dilemma #3: Moodiness

Smart Solution: How are your middle schooler's emotions like the weather? They're unpredictable, they can't be controlled, and you may need to adjust your plans based on what they look like. By far, moodiness is one of the most maddening trademarks of the preteen. Still, it's important to understand where some of this fluctuating behavior comes from.

By the end of adolescence, your child will have undergone tremendous physical and emotional changes, due in large part to hormones. At times, she'll be gangly, strong, awkward, lithe, angry, unsure, confident, your "little girl," and a sullen young stranger. Keep in mind, though, that her mood swings are no easier on her than they are on you.

Happily, this too shall pass. In the meantime, here are some ways to cope with your middle schooler's uneven moods:



- Validate her. You wouldn't want someone to minimize your suffering, so don't minimize her. If she's clearly in an awful mood, don't force a chipper "Turn that frown upside-down!" platitude on her. She's entitled to feel rotten once in awhile.
- Be a supporter, not an interrogator. If she comes home from school and looks upset, don't grill her for details. Although your intentions are admirable, you'll likely cause her to clam up. Instead, offer support—"I'm here if you need me"—then back off.
- Pay attention. If her gloominess suddenly gets worse, she begins withdrawing from friends, or she no longer eats or sleeps well, she may be suffering from depression. If you suspect this is the case, it's critical to speak with her guidance counselor or pediatrician. True depression is not something you can fix by yourself.
- Be firm. If your child lashes out in anger (which isn't exactly unheard of among middle schoolers), let her know that it's not acceptable: "I understand that you're mad, but you're not going to take it out on me. When you cool off, we can talk about what's bothering you."
- Keep your bearings. Your child shifts from furious to friendly so fast that you're surprised she doesn't pull a muscle. Relax, it's normal. Just remember that preteens' moods truly are like a rollercoaster: They shoot up and down at break-neck speed, they're fascinating, and they probably make you more than a little queasy.



Discipline Dilemma #4: Homework Headaches

Smart Solution: Homework issues are the middle school equivalent of teething: a nagging ache for the child that somehow manages to impact Mom and Dad, too. By the time he reaches adolescence, your child should be responsible for getting his assignments completed on time. (If you haven't yet given him a calendar or planner to use for keeping track of his work, do it now.)

If he has serious problems with homework, consider meeting with his guidance counselor to figure out whether his workload is truly too large. Also, take a look at his extracurricular schedule. Does he have basketball, debate team or yearbook committee five days a week? If so, he could be overextended.

If, however, he's like countless other middle schoolers and simply drags his feet when it comes to homework, try these ideas for solving the problem:

- Stick to routines. You may not need to be as rigid as you once were, but you should still formulate some kind of homework routine for your middle schooler. For instance, if he needs 30 minutes to chill out after school, fine. But insist that the next 30 minutes be spent hitting the books.
- Ban the electronics. Your child may be convinced that he works better with jet engine-decibel music blaring, but he's mistaken. Consider making homework time a "no TV, no radio" time.
- Try tying his household privileges to homework completion if procrastination is an ongoing problem. If he's not allowed to watch TV, skateboard or send e-mail until his work is finished, he'll have a huge incentive to buckle down.

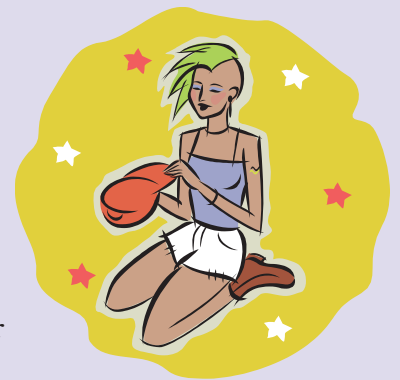
Discipline Dilemma #5: Independence

Smart Solution: Not everyone can pull off the "green hair and orange nail polish" look, right? Actually, no one can—but that won't stop your middle schooler from sporting it anyway. Or from wanting to show it off at the mall. Where she wants you to drop her and her friends. Alone.

What to do? Well, since they don't make preteen-size playpens, you can't keep her in the house forever. Instead, accept the fact that these years are all about the quest for freedom. Which is not to say that your child should have carte blanche to do whatever she wants, whenever she wants. Instead, this is the time to let her experiment—within the confines of your family's rules—with independence and individuality.

Here are some ideas for balancing her need for autonomy with your desire to keep her safe:

- Is her outfit offensive or merely hideous? If you don't like it—purple cargo pants and a camouflage T-shirt, anyone?—but it's not inappropriate or risqué, just grin and bear it. Cling to the knowledge that she'll probably wear nicer duds to her wedding.
- Let her maturity guide you. If she's consistently dependable at home and school, for example, she may be ready to walk to the neighborhood carryout by herself. There's no one-size-fits-all solution to the independence issue, however, so it's crucial to know her maturity level before letting her set off on her own.
- Stay informed. You can't shelter her from the outside world, but you can make her more secure in it. Before she goes anywhere, find out where she's going, who she'll be with and when she'll return. This is also a good time to talk about stranger danger, as well as which adults to seek out—police officers, security guards, mothers with strollers—if she's away from home and needs help.



Natural vs. Logical Consequences

There are two types of consequences: natural and logical.

Natural consequences are automatic; they don't require any intervention from you. For example, if your child leaves his inline skates in the front yard, they could be stolen. That would be a natural consequence of his irresponsibility.

Logical consequences are penalties you enforce based on specific transgressions. If your child goes to the movies with a friend when you've told him not to, a logical consequence would be that he can't go anywhere for a few days.

When possible, rely on natural consequences—let your child deal with the fallout from his actions. The less often you rescue him—such as by rushing to help him finish a forgotten school project—the sooner he'll learn to be responsible for himself.



Appropriate Consequences

He may be too old for time-out, but there are plenty of reasonable consequences you can enforce when your middle schooler breaks the rules. Here are a few:

- **Modified grounding.** Write several major chores (for example, cleaning the garage, washing the windows, etc.) on index cards. When your child misbehaves, pick a card at random. Until the task written on it is completed to your satisfaction, he loses all household perks.
- **A withdrawal of chauffeuring services.** If he's petulant every time you drop him off at his friend's house, stop driving him.
- **Canceling of an activity** (for example, no going to Friday's football game).
- **Loss of privileges** (such as no phone or CD player).
- **Silence.** Middle schoolers hate being ignored, so if his behavior is unacceptable, tune him out.

Try a Little Togetherness

Your middle schooler may want (and need) time alone, but he also needs lots of love and support from you. Here are some ways to stay connected while honoring his desire for time apart:

- **Eat dinner together.** If an over-full schedule interferes with family meals, it's time to drop some activities. Study after study has shown that sitting and eating together is hugely beneficial to children.
- **Use active listening.** When your child says something, pay attention. Let him know that you heard him, and acknowledge the feeling he's trying to convey ("That math test does sound tough. I can see why you're worried about it").
- **Invite him along.** He may not want to play board games with you and his younger sister, but go ahead and make the offer. Remember, he may be taller than you, but he's still a kid.
- **Don't criticize the things he likes.** You don't have to love his music or wardrobe, but you don't need to disparage them, either. (Unless he's listening to or wearing something repugnant. In that situation, put your foot down.)

Technology Tamers

Along with promoting obesity and unhealthy habits, “vegging out” in front of the TV or computer can expose your child to way too much violence. According to a 32-year study, in fact, children’s watching of TV violence was a big predictor of whether they’d be aggressive later in life.

To minimize your middle-schooler’s exposure to violence and other adult content, follow these guidelines:

- Limit his TV, computer and video game time to no more than an hour or two each day (including time spent instant-messaging or e-mailing friends).
- Be aware of what he’s watching. When possible, watch TV together.
- Don’t let him have a television in his room.
- Keep the family computer in a central location, and talk to him about Internet safety (e.g., don’t visit chat rooms, disclose personal information, etc.).
- Consider using filters to block Internet pornography. (Filters are not a substitute for parental supervision, however.)
- Just say no. If you have serious misgivings about your child’s exposure to the Internet, consider dropping online service for the computer he uses. He can still use the computer for word processing and data storage, but you won’t need to worry about what—and who—he’s encountering on the Web.



Drugs and Alcohol: the Red Flags



Sometimes, what you assume is a simple episode of misbehavior is actually evidence of a larger problem: substance abuse. Although it’s not always easy to tell whether your child is using drugs or alcohol, there are warning signs. If he exhibits one or more of the following symptoms, you may need to intervene (see “Where to Go for Help,” at right):

- He’s unusually irritable, careless about his appearance, or disengaged at school.
- He’s hanging out with a new group of friends.
- He’s lost interest in activities he once enjoyed.
- His eating and sleeping habits are off.
- His eyes are red and his nose is runny, but he isn’t ill.
- Household money is disappearing.

Where to Go for Help

Not every discipline problem can or should be handled at home. If you need help dealing with your middle schooler’s behavior, here are some places to find it:

- Her teacher, principal or guidance counselor.
- Other significant adults in her life, including coaches and clergy.
- Your pediatrician or family physician (who can refer you to an adolescent psychologist or behaviorist).
- Organizations such as ToughLove[®] International (www.toughlove.org).

For More Information

“Children, Adolescents, and Television”

American Academy of Pediatrics
www.aap.org/policy/re0043.html

Go to Your Room!

by Shari Steelsmith
Parenting Press
1-800-992-6657
www.parentingpress.com

“How Can I Talk to My Child About Drugs? Grades 7-9” and “Is Your Child Using Drugs? How to Find Out”

Partnership for a Drug-Free America®
www.drugfreeamerica.org

“Independence Days”

by Ann Colin Herbst
Parents
September 2003
Gruner + Jahr USA
1-800-777-0222
<http://gjusa.com>

“Modified Grounding”

Center for Effective Parenting
[www.parenting-ed.org/handout3/
Discipline%20and%20Intervention%20Strategie/
grounding.htm](http://www.parenting-ed.org/handout3/Discipline%20and%20Intervention%20Strategie/grounding.htm)

“Moody Blues”

by Cris Beam
Parenting
December/January 2004
The Parenting Group
1-800-234-0847
www.parenting.com

“Parenting Pre-Teens: 3 Steps to Active Listening”

RaisingKids.com,
www.raisingkids.co.uk/9_13/pre_htp10.asp

Surviving Your Adolescents

by Thomas W. Phelan, Ph.D.
Child Management, Inc.

“Warning: Too Much TV is Hazardous to Your Health”

TV Turnoff Network
[www.tvturnoff.org/images/facts&figs/
factsheets/Hazardous.pdf](http://www.tvturnoff.org/images/facts&figs/factsheets/Hazardous.pdf)

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