

11 Ways to Help Your Middle Schooler Have a Peaceful School Year

An Excerpt from *The Kids' Guide to Working Out Conflicts: How to Keep Cool, Stay Safe and Get Along*

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The middle school years are filled with challenges and change – budding bodies, raging hormones, altered attitudes and questions about life that might never have popped up before. Add all this to the rising tide of conflict and bullying that take place in middle schools, and even the most balanced kid can become overwhelmed. How can parents prepare their middle schoolers for the road ahead? What can we do so bumps in the road don't turn into detours?

Here are 11 ways you can help your middle schooler start a peaceful year that continues until the last day of school:

1. Plan "Just Us" nights at least every other week throughout the year. These are nights that are just for the two of you (try late afternoons if nights are hard to schedule). During "Just Us" nights, choose something to do that you can both enjoy together – not TV or video games – even if it's just lying around and eating popcorn. Relax, unwind, talk and have fun. The purpose of these nights is threefold: to strengthen your bond, to open doors of communication and to enable your child to have time with you that he can depend on. Being there is more important than ever now that your child is in middle school.
2. Have your first "Just Us" night before or at the start of school. When you're together share the trepidations you experienced when you started middle school. Ask your child about his. Then just listen. Listening empathetically opens doors to communication and trust. Unsolicited advice and opinions closes them. Ask your middle schooler to let you know when he's ready for advice. Be patient and keep listening.
3. Help your child set realistic intentions for the school year. Ask: "If you could create this year exactly as you'd want it to be, what would it be like?" Encourage your child to look at the academic, social and emotional aspects of the year ahead. Then ask him to think of things he can do to create the kind of year he envisions. Let the answers come from him as much as possible. Remind him that we really do have the power to create the quality of our lives, and it's based almost entirely on the choices we make. Have your child write down his intentions for the year along with things he'll do to help them manifest. Encourage him to post this in his room or someplace where it is clearly visible..
4. Talk about self-care. Ask: "What can you do to best take care of your mind and body so you feel and look your best? Brainstorm together and have her make a list. Guide her to include getting to bed on time, eating a healthy breakfast every morning, avoiding junk food as much as possible, limiting screen time (TV, videos, computer games, e-mailing) and factoring in down-time for relaxing.
5. Teach your child anti-bullying strategies. Unfortunately, bullying is rampant in middle school. Prepare your child by providing some strategies. Help her identify what constitutes bullying and what she can do if bullying takes place. A few simple tips:
 - Choose friends who are kind. If someone's cruel or hurtful, that's not a good person to hang out with. Even having one good friend is enough.

- If someone bullies you, stand tall, look the person in the eye, steady your voice and say something like, "I don't need to listen to this." Then walk away with your head held high. If the bullying continues, talk to an adult at home or at school.
- Teach children not to bully someone else. If they already have bullied, talk to them about making amends.
- Encourage them to have compassion for kids who are picked on. Suggest they offer kindness to them, and never join in when others are treating them cruelly. Even quietly laughing can add to the hurt.
- Let your child know the door is always open if he needs to talk. Make yourself available. Middle schoolers might act like they don't need us anymore, but they really do – a lot. Be there for your child, even if it's inconvenient.

7. Identify other trusted adults your child can talk to. The middle school years are a time of growing independence. Your child might not want to come to you about every problem or insecurity he experiences. It is much better to have someone else to talk to than keep the problem inside. Depression in children is growing. Talking about the problem is the key in preventing it. Help your child identify people he can reach out to – a relative, a family friend or someone at his school or your place of worship.

8. Have your child think of at least two things that help her relax and de-stress. Exercise, playing with the dog, reading a book. Whatever it is, encourage him or her to do something relaxing for at least 10 minutes a day. Middle schoolers need antidotes to the tensions they experience daily.

9. Keep an eye on things and set reasonable limits. Know where your child is at all times and who she's hanging out with. Don't be afraid to set limits. As much as they might complain, kids depend on us to set limits for them until they're old enough to do so for themselves. Setting reasonable limits creates a safe and secure foundation.

10. Make sure your child isn't over-structured. Kids need time to breathe, and so do we. If your child has too many activities, time to relax, reflect and unwind disappears. Over-structuring leads to stress, exhaustion and being overwhelmed. Better to have only one or two after school activities that leave open spaces of time for sanity.

11. Love your child unconditionally and don't be afraid to show it. You may need to be more private and discreet in your expressions of affection, and never take your child's reticence to return hugs as a personal rejection. Love is still the most powerful force on earth, and that's true for people of all ages.