

The Tween Years

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The "tween" years are a time for extremes--some of your kid's greatest memories as well as difficulties will occur between the ages of ten and fourteen years of age. This is a time of intense change--physically, emotionally as well as socially. So, the normal ups and downs experienced by grade-schoolers are magnified ten-fold when your kid hits middle and high school!

What's s parent to do? Lots--there are four main areas of parental involvement that can ease your child's transition through this time period and help her to navigate adolescence successfully. Let's take a look at these sanity-saving tactics:

1. HAVE CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Tweens, even more so than their younger or older counterparts, need to know what is expected of them--both at school as well as on the home - front. Guidelines, limit setting, and clear, fair rules go a long way in terms of letting your child know how far to push the envelope, what he or she can get away with, what behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate, and when to go along with the program even if they don't especially want to. Most tweens are less than thrilled with completing their homework, and they'd much rather watch Dawson's Creek than plow through their math problems. And, that's where you, the parent, come in. If your child knows that there's no TV until homework is completed or the kitchen is cleaned he'll comply, especially if there is a consequence attached to the requested behavior. Allowance, privileges, bedtime, electricity (using anything that plugs into the wall or needs batteries with the exception of lights, blow dryers or alarm clocks) are excellent consequences that will definitely motivate your kid to get moving. Also, limits and guidelines make a child feel secure--they know what is expected of them each day and understand what good things will occur if they respond appropriately, and what negative consequences will happen if they chose not to comply. Security and permanence are especially important to your kid during the tween years, as just about everything else seems to be in a state of flux.

KEEP YOUR CHILD INVOLVED IN ACTIVITIES

A bored tween is often an unhappy tween. Kids this age thrive on activity--both mentally and physically. Those who sit around tend to watch too much TV, eat too much, perhaps spend too much time on suspect internet chat lines, and often become depressed. Tweens are still children, and one of the main jobs of childhood is to learn how to play cooperatively, to have fun, to expend energy, and to just goof -off. Sadly, though, many tweens feel the social pressure to resist playing, even though in their hearts that is what they yearn for. Playing catch and flag football are not only fun, but relieve stress after a long day at school. Playing Barbies or a board game is the stuff of childhood, yet tweens often succumb to their friends' notion that anything less than living on the phone or shopping at the mall is politically incorrect.

If this is your child, encourage her to get to know the neighbor kids again and to dust out the tree house and engage in real play. If possible, sign your kid up for a supervised sport team, where he'll be able to learn some new skills, make friends, increase his self-concept based on his athletic accomplishments, and expend energy in an acceptable fashion. Involved kids are often too busy to get into trouble, to dabble with cigarettes or drugs, or to become depressed. Also, check out the youth group at your place of worship, the school's chess club or debate team, or the local thespian society. Your child will be busier, happier and more involved, and even though getting your kid to activities may run you a bit ragged, it sure beats childhood depression or substance abuse!

TEACH YOUR KID COMPASSION

One of the most important needs of children this age is to feel significant, valued, and important. The lucky ones may get these needs met if they are popular with peers, know how to successfully work a crowd, or are the teacher's pet. Most other tweens, though, need to work at being significant, and a sure bet is to involve them in an activity that helps others. There's no better way to feel important or needed than to help someone less fortunate than yourself. Volunteering at a local soup kitchen, day-care center, nursing home or animal shelter helps your child to value the positive things in her own life and will help her to develop a compassion for others not so fortunate. I've noticed time and again that kids who volunteer and help others are much less likely to tease, bully or harass other kids. Compassion is not innate--it is learned through experience with a variety of life situations. It's also not a bad idea if you're involved in the activity -- leading by example works well, and you'll probably feel better for the volunteer time spent with your child.

ENCOURAGE DIALOGUE AND COMMUNICATION

Whether your tween admits it or not, you are the most important person in his life. Although he may respond with grunts rather than with words, your kid is depending upon you to be there for him, not only to give him a ride to the ball field or to the movies, but also to talk to listen to his concerns. This does not mean that he necessarily wants your advice or will use it, he may just desire your listening ear. If he needs your suggestions, he'll let you know, especially if you've proven yourself to be a good listener, fairly non-judgmental and capable of not interrupting him! One of the biggest gripes that I hear from tweens is that their folks are so anxious to fix the problem that they just don't take the time to let the kid fully explain the situation--Mom or Dad have already interrupted and Junior shuts down, waiting for the same ol' lecture. If this sounds familiar--try to break the pattern by going for nightly walks where your child can talk if he wants to or the two of you can just be together. Some of the best communicating I've done with my kids has been of the silent variety--just spending time together walking the dog or taking a leisurely bike ride. If he's got something on his mind he'll share it, if you've proven yourself to be a good listener. Being your tween's confidant is not only a responsibility, but an honor not to be taken lightly. Also, consider the alternative--if he can't share his concerns with you and depends upon his peers for advice--that can be really scary!

Try these tips--they'll help you and your child make it through the toughest time of childhood. Give your kid permission to be a child again and to engage in activities that are just pure fun and not a mimicry of the teens she sees on TV, at school, or on the magazine racks!