



Raising a resilient middle schooler

Middle school can be a time of considerable change for children — a new school setting, tougher coursework, a whole new cast of friends. In light of all this, even the most up-for-the-challenge kids are likely to feel stress and confusion at times.

As with adults, when children are confronted with new challenges, they run the risk of failing at what they try, saying the wrong thing or making the wrong decision.

During the pre-teen years — when making friends and finding a way to fit in are prime motivators — just about anything that makes kids stand out, particularly in an unflattering way, can seem horrifying. They quickly learn that going along with the crowd is sometimes the easiest way to feel safe and secure. This can mean caving in to peer pressure or making unsafe or unwise decisions, including experimenting with alcohol and other drugs, rather than risking rejection or criticism.

There are, however, many children who do well academically, socially and emotionally despite the challenges and changes. Increasingly, researchers are finding that children who are resilient are the ones who have the strength to do what they know is right and to resist negative peer influences.

WHAT MAKES A RESILIENT CHILD?

Resilience is the ability to roll with life's punches. Some of us are born with more resilience; others need to work harder to develop this ability.

Resilience is a skill that will help your children weather the middle school years and will serve them well throughout their lives. And the good news is that resilience is something you can help your children develop.

Resilience in children is built from success with life's daily challenges, such as tackling schoolwork or handling difficulties with friends. It can also come from trying a new sport or joining a club that none of their friends belong to.

Given lots of opportunity to try new things — and a safety net built from supportive family, teachers and friends — children can experience success in unfamiliar settings and with new challenges. The more success they experience, the more their self-esteem and confidence grow. And ultimately, the more resilient they become.

HELPING KIDS LEARN TO ROLL WITH LIFE'S PUNCHES

It is normal for middle schoolers to begin pulling away from their parents and putting greater stock in what friends think and say. This can leave parents wondering how much influence they still have. Believe it or not, you do have a lot of ability to help shape your children's attitudes and guide their decisions. The key is learning how to stay connected with your children and offer them your advice and when to take a step back and let them try things their own way.

Here are some ways families can help build children's confidence and, ultimately, their resilience:

► **Empathize.** As adults, it can be easy to make light of the stresses of the early teenage years. If your child opens up to you about something that is bothering or confusing him or her, it is likely something that you should give your full attention to.

► **Talk with your children/ become a supportive listener.** Despite families' on-the-go lifestyles, it's important to find



time to talk and really connect with your children each day. Before the homework and dinner rush, take a walk together. Talk in the car during daily commutes-kids are likely to be more comfortable opening up if they aren't face-to-face and be ready to have the heart-to-heart at bedtime when you're most exhausted, but your children feel most safe and secure.

► **Help your children understand that you love them** for the unique people they are, not simply for what they do or don't do.

► **Teach your children to problem solve,** think for themselves and make decisions. As parents, our first instinct is to shelter our children from the less appealing parts of life and keep them from making unwise choices. However, as they get older, children want to make more of their own decisions. Resilient children are able to describe their problems, consider different solutions and learn from the outcomes. Sometimes, role-playing can help prepare them for an actual event, particularly when children are trying to summon the courage to confront a difficult situation.

► **When you set limits, offer acceptable alternatives.** As parents, there are times you do know what's best for your children. If you are uncomfortable with your children going to the mall to see a movie without supervision, tell them why. A possible alternative that allows them some freedom, but helps you feel in control, might be going with them to the show, but sitting a few rows back. Another might be picking up a DVD and popcorn at the video store and inviting your children and their friends to hang out at your house.

► **Use television or movies to spark discussions about sex, drugs and other high-risk behaviors.** Many teen movies and television shows, commercials, the Internet and print media are filled with images designed to sway children toward such products as tobacco and alcohol or other drugs. They also can include adult content. Help your children become critical consumers. Preview the shows they watch and the sites they visit online. Talk with them about the subliminal messages that movies, e-zines and print magazines aim at kids. **For more information, log on to <http://www.aap.org/family/mediainpact.htm> or <http://www.rctruth.org>.**

IMPORTANT NEWS

for Students and Parents

What Can Parents Do in the Middle School?

(Tips from the U.S. Department of Education)

The way that parents become involved in their child's middle school can be somewhat different from what they were accustomed to in the elementary school. Generally, the building is larger, and it could be located farther from home. A middle school student may have several teachers, not just one as in the elementary school. The schedule is probably more complicated.

Don't be surprised if your teenagers feel embarrassed when you go to their school. It is not uncommon for them to resent their parents' presence at school. Here are some suggestions to increase your involvement:

- ▶ **Get to know several teachers**, not just one. Don't wait for a problem to talk to them.
- ▶ **Keep in touch with the guidance counselors.** They generally know all of the students in the school, and they can keep you informed regarding the progress and behavior of your child.
- ▶ **Read all information on school policies and curriculum carefully.** Normally, schools send this information home at the beginning of the school year.
- ▶ **Review your child's school records each year.** It is your right, and you should know what information is in the file.
- ▶ **Keep informed about your child's grades and test results**, especially in any subjects in which he or she has problems. Ask for help if it is needed.
- ▶ **Request periodic meetings with the teachers.** If you don't speak or understand English, ask for a translator or bring a bilingual friend or family member with you. Request information concerning programs that the school offers for students with limited English proficiency. Be sure your child is placed in the program that best meets his or her needs.
- ▶ **Get to know other parents and form support groups** to work on problems and issues of mutual interest.
- ▶ **Answer notes and other correspondence the school sends.** If you do not understand these messages due to language problems, ask the principal to send them to you in the language you understand.

What Can Parents Do to Support Education at Home?

There are many ways that parents can demonstrate to their adolescent children that they are interested in academic success and that they are available to offer support and protection when there are problems. Here are some suggestions:

- ▶ **Talk with your child about what happens at school every day.** Ask often if there are messages from the school.
- ▶ **Spend some relaxed time with your children.** Share a meal or a snack. Tell them often what you like about them.
- ▶ **Listen to and share their worries.** Support what you believe to be good about the school and offer your help to change any school practices that you believe could be harmful to your child.
- ▶ **Avoid scoldings and arguments when your teenagers bring bad news home.** Listen to their reasons and offer your help to improve the situation. It helps if your children know you believe they will be successful.
- ▶ **Value their education by encouraging homework and reading.** Help your children choose a good time and place to do their assignments and special projects. Provide the necessary materials and give them your unconditional support.

How can I help with homework?

THERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS IN WHICH YOU CAN HELP:

- ▶ Send your children to school each day, well-rested, fed and with a positive outlook.
- ▶ Take an active interest in your children's schooling. Ask specific questions about what happens at school each day and how your children feel about it.
- ▶ Try not to let any of your own negative experiences keep you from supporting and encouraging your children's learning. Let them know how much you care about education by continuing your own learning both informally and formally, to impress its importance upon them.
- ▶ If possible, set up a quiet, comfortable study area with good lighting and the school supplies that your children need. This can be almost anyplace in your home; you don't need a special room.
- ▶ Set a family "quiet time" where you and your children can work together on homework, reading, letter writing and playing games.
- ▶ Allow your children to study in the way each of them learns best. For example, some children work best when they're lying on the floor with background music playing.

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