

THE “TWEEN” YEARS: 10 – 13 YEAR OLDS

The “tween” years can be challenging for young adolescents and their parents. “Tweens” are continuing to explore their community and world and are beginning to develop unique identities as separate from their parents. Although not often acknowledged by the child, parents continue to be extremely important in the life of the young adolescent. Your child needs your encouragement, your teaching, your discipline, your ability to model social interactions and decision making.

NUTRITION

By now, most children know which foods are healthy and so can be encouraged to make nutritious choices.

1. Allow your young adolescent to look through cookbooks and choose new, healthy recipes for the family to try. She can make a list of ingredients needed and go shopping with you to purchase the items.
2. Preparing a meal provides your tween with opportunities to learn organizational skills, to be creative with a recipe, to help his family, and to share in the enjoyment of eating the food that he has cooked.
3. Make a “breakfast” like pancakes or waffles for dinner. Or...make a “dinner” like tacos for breakfast. Early teens enjoy knowing their parents are flexible and can allow routines to change.
4. Continue to be a good role model by choosing healthy foods and eating more fruits and vegetables.
5. Some research shows that Americans need additional vitamin D. Consider using a multi-vitamin.
6. Tweens and adolescents are growing rapidly and need calcium to develop good bone health – now and in the future. Adolescents need at least 1500 mg of calcium a day, so consider a calcium supplement.

Everyone in the family should limit the amount of fried foods, fatty foods, and junk foods that they eat. Since you still control the shopping list, choose your groceries carefully. Don’t buy sodas, chips, candies, cookies, cupcakes. Nutritious snacks include fresh fruit, popcorn, pretzels, cheese and crackers, string cheese, raisins, nuts, carrot sticks, yogurt and dried fruit.

DINNER HOUR

One of the best traditions a family can share together is to eat meals with each other as many times during the week as possible. The dinner hour is especially important and we encourage families to make every effort to eat dinner together. This time allows the family to “regroup” and to share the day’s events with each other. You can use this time as a time for fun, sharing experiences, talking about feelings and emotions, discussing problems. Meal time should be a relaxing time and not a time for discipline. Turn off the television during dinner to encourage discussion. Research has shown that teenagers are less likely to participate in high-risk behaviors if they have shared meal times with their parents.

DENTAL

Your child should continue to have regular dental visits and should be brushing and flossing at least twice a day. Make sure she is using a toothpaste containing fluoride.

PUBERTY / SEX ED

Most parents and their adolescents agree that sexual issues should be taught in the home. However, over one-third of adolescents surveyed said they have never had helpful conversations about sex with their parents. We hope that you will use these middle school years as ways to connect with your pre-teen and discuss important life issues.

Puberty is the time of life when male and female bodies transition from childhood to adulthood and become capable of reproduction. Puberty usually begins between the ages of 9 – 13 years in girls and 10 – 14 years in boys. During puberty both boys and girls gain weight and grow taller. Chemical hormones are produced that cause male and female body changes to occur. Young adolescents normally have many questions and concerns about the process of puberty, whether or not their bodies are normal, and what changes they can expect. Your pre-teen will also experience emotional changes and may quickly go from excitement to sadness – and are often unable to explain why.

SCHOOL – Middle School or Junior High

The transition to middle school can often be difficult for pre-teens. Students in middle school have to navigate a new school setting, as well as learning how to change classrooms several times a day. Your pre-teen will also be exposed to several different teachers, and each teacher will have different rules. So, your student will need to be more organized and more flexible than he was in elementary school.

Your pre-teen should be able to easily read most newspapers and magazines and understand what she is reading. She should also be able to complete math problems that involve multiplication, division, and fractions. If you have any concerns about your student's abilities at school, please make an appointment to talk with the school counselor, principal, or pediatrician.

BULLIES

Bullying can increase during the middle school years and unfortunately can become very serious. The bullying can take the form of emotional as well as physical abuse, and emotional distress is often much more damaging. Students are even at risk for emotional abuse while using personal spaces and chat rooms on the internet. Please talk with your child frequently and make sure that he feels safe at school. There are many resources for students who have experienced bullying, so please talk with your pediatrician if this is a concern.

HOMEWORK

By now, your middle school student should be able to take most of the responsibility for doing her homework. She should be able to keep a list of her homework assignments and complete the work herself. Because middle school students often need help in learning organizational skills, take time to regularly sit with your pre-teen and discuss homework. Show him how to keep lists of homework assignments, how to keep lists of needed equipment, and how to decide when during the day there is time to do homework. An excellent resource is *Homework without Tears*

TELEVISION / VIDEO GAMES / COMPUTER GAMES / MEDIA / CELL PHONES

Most middle school students are constantly exposed to modern technology. Unfortunately time spent using media often means:

1. exposure to violence and inappropriate sexual messages
2. less time for homework
3. less time for exercising, reading, exploring, creating or just day dreaming.
4. behavioral changes that can include increased aggression, decreased creativity, and hyperactivity
5. weight gain because food is eaten while watching television and less time is spent exercising

PARENTS: We encourage you to control media access.

1. LIMIT ALL "SCREEN TIME" TO ONE HOUR A DAY – OR LESS.
2. CHILDREN LEARN VALUES FROM PROGRAMS and ADVERTISEMENTS – Be there with your child to point out your value system and to help her question the messages of the programs and advertisements.
3. DO NOT ALLOW YOUR CHILD TO HAVE A TELEVISION OR COMPUTER IN HER ROOM. It is more difficult to monitor programs and internet use. Place the media screens in a central location where you can see what your child is doing.
4. MONITOR INTERNET SITES and EMAIL ACCOUNTS. Remind your tween to never share personal information on the internet.
5. MONITOR MUSIC/ CDs, MAGAZINES / LITERATURE that comes into your pre-teen's life
6. LIMIT CELL PHONE USE – and be aware that many companies are now sending pornographic material to cell phones without requests

Research confirms that adolescents are less likely to participate in high risk behaviors if their parents are involved in their lives and provide guidance about media use.

There are websites that will help you and your family choose media that supports your values.

Consider www.common sense media.com and www.commercialfreechildhood.org

HOUSEHOLD TASKS / FAMILY WORK / CHORES

Pre-teens need to be learning how to function in the real world. Participating in household tasks will prepare your student for when he leaves home. Help him learn how to do the laundry, cook meals, clean the house, mow the lawn, and take care of the pets. Make sure your pre-teen has a list of daily and weekly tasks that she is expected to accomplish. Children who do chores at home feel more connected to their families and are more likely to achieve better grades in college.

SPORTS / EXERCISE

Exercise is especially important for middle school students. Not only do their rapidly growing bodies need physical activity, but exercise also helps maintain their emotional well being. Adolescents who participate in sports have better self-esteem and do better in school. Boys especially benefit from the experience provided by team sports as they learn the rules of the world, how to handle competition, how to be a gracious winner or loser, and how to work diligently to accomplish a goal.

TEACHING VALUES

Children are learning from you every day. YOU are their best teacher. They are learning from watching you how to talk to other people, how to treat each other, how to interact in the family. They are learning how to work, how to solve problems, how to deal with their emotions. They are learning what you do and do not value.

SELF-ESTEEM

Pre-teens often measure their self-esteem by external values such as physical appearance, finances (brands of clothes purchased), and number of friends. Pre-teens are especially likely to have bad self-image because their bodies are changing (acne is often present) and they feel clumsy. Research tells us that almost 80% of adolescents do not like the way they look!

Your pre-teen needs constant reassurance from you that he is valued, that you see the good decisions he is making, and that you enjoy being with his friends. You can let your pre-teen hear you talking with your friends about how much you admire him for a recent good decision or accomplishment. Each pre-teen needs to know that there is something unique and special about her – an activity, a hobby, an area of expertise that allows her to stand out from her peers. If your pre-teen does not have a unique ability, please consider encouraging her to pursue an activity or hobby that might allow her to develop that.

MONEY

Giving your child an allowance is an excellent way to begin teaching your child how to handle money. Some families choose to give their children a small allowance, feeling it is important for children to know that everyone benefits from the parents' employment. These families do not equate allowance with doing chores. Other families believe that children should learn that they earn money by doing work, and so they are given an allowance after chores are completed. Some families combine approaches - the children are given a small allowance and receive additional money for extra work that is done.

The most important thing is for parents to show children how to “use” money – how to put money away to be saved, how to pay for small items at the store, how to use money for gifts for other people. You may want to increase his allowance, while also requiring him to have a little budget – items that he has to purchase with his own money.

DECISION MAKING

Your child should be given the opportunity to begin making decisions and experiencing the consequences (both positive and negative) of her decisions. There are many decisions that a pre-teen can help make – if you feel it is appropriate

1. Which after-school activities to participate in
2. Which restaurant to go to
3. What weekend activity for the family to do together
4. Which friends to invite over
5. How to spend her money

6. What clothes to wear
7. How to schedule her homework

Show your child how to think about decisions.

1. Determine what the options are
2. Consider every possibility
3. Think about strengths and weaknesses of each choice – Think of the pros and cons
4. Choose the best alternative
5. Re-evaluate after you see the results. Decide whether or not it was a good choice and what you might do differently next time.

WHAT OTHER VALUES DO YOU WANT YOUR CHILD TO LEARN?

Time Management

Help your child create a weekly chart of chores or tasks to be completed, books to read, etc.
Make sure your child's life is not overly scheduled. He needs time to relax, think, daydream.

Friendship

Begin discussing what qualities to look for in a friend
Encourage your student to have his friends come over to YOUR home – then you will meet her friends and will know exactly what your pre-teen is doing

Personal acceptance of failure

Admit in front of your child when you have made a mistake
Acknowledge your feelings, but express the idea that you can try again or learn from your mistake.

Expressing emotions

Emotions are never right or wrong – they are simply feelings. It is our behavior that can be right or wrong. Help your child see the difference. “I can see you are very angry, but it is not acceptable to kick your brother.”

Religion

A place of worship is often a place where you can meet other families who share your values and who can support your family.

Peer pressure

1. Clearly state your family's values
2. Make sure your actions match your words
3. Talk about the types of peer pressure – through society, media, friends
4. Talk about ways to stand up against peer pressure and role play with your tween
Think of words to say – “I don't need drugs to make me feel happy.”
5. Make sure your pre-teen knows that you care most about her personal safety
6. Give reasons for making positive, healthy choices

Use of drugs / alcohol

It is much easier and much better to discuss your family's values regarding use of drugs and alcohol during the early middle school years. Your pre-teen will still be listening to you and will more likely incorporate your values. You should know that many studies show that the younger a teen begins using drugs/alcohol/cigarettes, the more likely they will become addicted.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

This is a wonderful time to work on your communication skills with your pre-teen. Some helpful hints are:

1. Clearly state your expectations so there is no confusion
2. Be accessible, approachable, and willing to listen
3. Be involved in your pre-teen's life – with school and with friends

The more time you spend together, the easier the communication. Consider spending a weekend away with your pre-teen as an opportunity to talk about upcoming physical and emotional changes, your family values, and expectations. This is also a time to have fun together!

SAFETY

1. BIKES – Review bike safety rules with your student. She should always wear a helmet.
2. Review your family's emergency plans for fire and earthquake in your home.
3. Remind your student that he should always tell you if someone is touching him inappropriately

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