

A Publication for

LISHA KILL &  
SAND CREEK

MIDDLE  
SCHOOL  
PARENTS

# CLASSROOM

connection

## Becoming a proactive middle school parent

As children move from elementary to middle school they begin to crave more independence. At the same time, parents often wonder how much freedom to allow children to have and how to stay involved with school without invading their children's turf.

The good news is there are many ways for parents to stay informed and involved without "smothering" your children's growing need for independence. And research shows that encouraging learning, setting high, but reasonable, expectations for children and making the extra effort to be involved with teen's education at home and in school can have long-lasting benefits. These include higher grades and tests scores, more positive attitudes and behaviors, less chance that kids will use alcohol and other drugs, higher graduation rates and fewer placements in special education.

### Creative ways to stay connected

In elementary school there are ready-made opportunities to be involved, such as "homeroom parents" or classroom party helpers. However, finding ways to stay connected during the middle school years takes a little more creativity.

Here are some tried and true suggestions from parents, teachers and social workers that will help keep you linked with school and your children during these early adolescent years:

► **Attend annual back-to-school events such as open house and parent conferences.** This is one of the best ways to learn about the increased academic demands of the middle school and to get to know teachers and learn about their expectations. Keep in mind, open house is a time to listen and ask general questions of teachers and staff. Questions or concerns about children's *individual* performance should be saved for a private follow-up, like the parent-teacher conference.

Parent-teacher conferences are a good time to get the real skinny on how your children are doing at school and where they need to apply themselves. It is a good opportunity to learn about school-based resources like academic intervention services (AIS) and counseling that can support children's school success.

► **Stay connected with technology.** Many of the busy parents we spoke with said they found it *extremely* helpful to be able to double-check homework assignments and communicate with teachers via recorded phone messages and/or e-mail, at any hour of the day. Often, teachers will include suggested at-home learning activities for families and on-line and print resources that can help support the school lessons. The district Web site can also be a great resource for information about upcoming school events and opportunities to volunteer at school.

### READ ALL ABOUT IT... the truth about tweens

Learning about the many physical, social and emotional changes that happen during the early teenage years can assure you that most of what your children are experiencing—shifting friendships, clothing crises, mood swings and all—is perfectly normal. Check out the Web site for KidsHealth at <http://www.kidshealth.com/kid/grow/index.html> and books like the *American Academy of Pediatrics Caring For Your Teenager* by Philip Bashe and *Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall: A Parent's Guide to the New Teenager, Revised and Updated* by Anthony E. Wolf for more information.

### ► Attend sporting events, school performances, etc.

There may not be a need or opportunity for you to spend regular time in your children's classrooms. And, in truth, having you right in their space may not be a dream for your

kids. But you can spend time in other

venues where you will meet their teachers and coaches and talk with their friends and their families. Interestingly, the families we spoke with mentioned their time driving to and from these types of events as most meaningful. If it's just you and your kids, you have uninterrupted time to catch up on their lives. If you take along their friends, you can observe how they interact with each other and gain some insight into what really matters for your children right now.

► **Offer your skills to improve the school community.** Perhaps you are a writer who can offer a few hours a week tutoring kids in language arts, or an auto mechanic who can inspire kids to apply themselves to their studies with a talk about the complex math and science that goes into your job. No matter what your background, you undoubtedly have things you can share that can enhance the learning that takes place at school. This is true even if the time you spend volunteering doesn't include your own children.

Volunteering your time in the school can help you forge friendly relationships with teachers and other school staff. This can go a long way toward building trust and softening the tension that can arise if problems develop down the road. It gives you an opportunity to meet your children's classmates and learn about the day-to-day routine at school. It also sends a powerful message to your children that school is important and worthy of your time.



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

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?

*An Excerpt From The Kids' Guide to Working Out Conflicts: How to Keep Cool, Stay Safe and Get Along*  
Source: *Children Today.com*

**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 empathically 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 her to think of things she can do to create the kind of year she envisions. Let the answers come from her as much as possible. Remind her 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 her intentions for the year along with things she'll do to help them manifest. Encourage her to post this in her room.
4. Before school starts, 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.

6. 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. Better to have someone else to talk to than keep the problem inside. Depression in children is growing. Having someone to talk to is 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 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.

## PREPARING FOR Parent-Teacher CONFERENCES

To get ready for a conference and to stick to your time slot, ask your child if there are any concerns two days before the conference. And then:

- ▶ Make a list of those concerns as well as any of your own
- ▶ Read your child's concerns and ask about any you do not understand
- ▶ If there are bullying issues, get full details
- ▶ Do not blame anyone for

anything until you have heard the full story

- ▶ Stay positive, talk about the good points of the situation and let the teacher know you are willing to work together for the success of your child
- ▶ Follow through with suggestions and talk to your child about a plan on improving specific areas

For a listing of upcoming parent conference dates, please check the district calendar.

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**SOUTH COLONIE CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT**

102 Loralee Drive ■ Albany, NY 12205

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