Talking with Your Middle Grader

You've probably noticed that your middle grader doesn't tell you as much as he used to. It's normal for him to become busier — and more private — as he gets older. The good news? There's plenty you can do to stay close to your child and keep conversations flowing. And communication can make your relationship stronger and help him succeed in school.

Read these ideas from other parents who have done it.

Find the right time

"I used to try to chat with my son Matthew right after school or when he got home from a friend's house. A lot of times, he wasn't in the mood to talk. Lately I've been trying to wait until he's more relaxed and rested, like after dinner or when his homework is finished. Or I'll bring him some tea or hot chocolate and casually ask what he's working on or if he has plans for the weekend. If I catch him at a time that's good for him, the conversation goes better."

Phrase questions carefully

"Every time I asked my daughter Teresa a question like 'How was school?' she would give me a one-word answer, and our discussion would go nowhere. So I realized I needed to ask specific questions, such as 'What's the most interesting thing you're learning in history?' or 'What do you think of the plays your drama club decided on for this year?' My questions don't always start a real conversation, but they definitely get us talking more."

Share an activity

"If I do something with my son that he enjoys, he's more likely to open up. For instance, sometimes I join Hunter to shoot hoops in the driveway after school. While we play, I'll chat casually about my day, and then he'll often share something about his. Or on weekends, we might go to an air show or a model train exhibit. I've discovered that when we're having fun together, he tends to talk more freely."

Ask her for advice

"My daughter Jade loves to get creative when she paints her nails. I once asked her to show me how she does fancy designs, and we wound up in a discussion that ended with her giving me a manicure. I realized that letting her be the expert could help us bond. Now, when I notice she has a knack for something, like making smoothies or using new apps, I ask her to teach me. It makes me feel more connected to her and gives us something to talk about."

Stop to listen

"I'm very busy with my job and keeping the household running. When my son Zach would ask me something, I often acted like I was listening when really I wasn't. He realized this and told me it bothered him. Since then, I've made an effort to stop what I'm doing so he knows I care about what he's saying. And if I can't pause at that moment, I let him know when I'll be available, like after dinner is in the oven. Then, I make sure to follow through."

continued

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Read the same book

"My daughter Kylie was reading a book that she couldn't put down. When she finished, I decided to read it, too, and then we had a good conversation about it. We talked about how the main character handled challenges and how we felt about her choices. We also discussed the ending and whether we would have written it differently. I liked hearing her thoughts, and I think she felt good that I read the book based on her recommendation."

Talk one-on-one

"It's not always easy to listen to my seventh grader when his little brother and sister are running around. An article I read reminded me that even when kids get older, they still need one-on-one time with their parents. So I started looking for opportunities to spend time alone with Ryan while the younger ones nap or after their bedtime. He doesn't always take me up on it, but when he does, I'm able to give him my undivided attention."

Stay tuned

"Keeping up with pop culture has given me a way to talk to my daughter Jordan. She's really into celebrities and music. Every so often I watch a show with her or play her music when we're in the car together. I've even picked up 'tween' magazines just to browse the latest news. That way, I can mention a new movie or hit album and ask her to tell me about it."

Be patient

"My sixth-grade son, Andy, sometimes takes a while to get to his point, and I have the urge to jump in and finish his sentences. I find, though, that if I wait a little longer, he finishes his thought— and it's often different from what I would have guessed. Now, I try to be patient, and I've been learning more about what is going on at school and with his friends."

Discuss current events

"When I read a newspaper article that I think will interest my daughter Salma, I try to use it as a conversation piece. For instance, she loves animals and is concerned about the environment, so I clipped an article about endangered polar bears. It led to a good discussion about what's being done to help the animals. We email each other articles, and our discussions about current events are giving us a way to connect."

Serious conversations

Talking to your child about heavy topics like alcohol, drugs, or sex can be intimidating. These suggestions may help:

- Think of it as a continuing conversation rather than one big talk. Look for chances to bring topics up naturally (like when a TV character is caught drinking). Mention the subjects regularly as opportunities arise.
- Remember that it's okay not to have all the answers. Ask for time to think something over, or say, "I don't know. Let's look it up." If you tell your tween you will get back to him with information, make a note to yourself so you'll remember.

- Share your values firmly and clearly, but try not to lecture, or your middle grader may shut down. If he makes a comment you don't agree with — say, he thinks kids should be allowed to get tattoos — you might ask, "Why do you think that?" Listen to his views, and explain your own. Point out that while he has the right to his opinion, your rules stand.

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