

## Helping Preadolescents Succeed in School and at Home

The toughest time for parents to communicate with and support their children is probably the young adolescent years (ages 10 to 15). Here are some tips to make life easier as your child enters this important period of their life:

- **Think ahead.** One of the best tools for parents is being prepared. As your son or daughter gets to the middle school years, get ready for at least occasional conflicts. Think through what is truly important to you. Is your child's hairstyle as important as homework? Isn't curfew more of a concern than crabbiness? Obviously, dawdling is a lot easier to accept than drugs. As these give-and-take situations start, know ahead of time what areas you are willing to negotiate and what areas are absolutes.

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- **Break down big chores into small parts.** Sometimes young people feel overwhelmed by tasks, especially those they've let go for a long time. A disastrous bed room, twenty-three overdue math assignments, a long-term project that's "suddenly" due in a few days (or hours!); all of these cause the preadolescent to choose to give up rather than get started.
- **Help your child by setting up smaller goals.** For example: clean off your bed; get five assignments done tonight; assemble the materials for the project. Preadolescents have trouble structuring tasks so that they are more approachable.
- **Don't hesitate to remind your child about appointments and due dates.** Try to think ahead about materials required for a project (unless you look forward to late-evening visits to K-Mart). This will not last

forever. When this same child was learning to walk, you held his or her hands and made the path smooth. Now he or she is learning to take on a tremendous assortment of life-tasks and changes; handholding (but not the firm, physical grip previously necessary) is needed for about a year or so as your youngster gets started on the road to being a responsible adult.

- **Be willing to listen; but don't poke or pry.** Kids this age value independence and often seem secretive. Keeping to themselves is part of the separateness they are trying to create. Let them know you'd love to help them, but don't push them into a defensive position.
- **When reprimanding, deal only with the precise problem, don't bring in other issues.** "The trash is still here, and I want it out, now," is better than, "You are so lazy! I told you to take that trash out two hours ago and it's still here! You'd live in a pigsty, wouldn't you? Well, you aren't the only one in this house, you know..."
- **If the issue is minor, keep things light.** The shoes on the floor, the wet towel on the bed, the carton left open; these are maddening, perhaps, but not earth-shattering. Call attention to them in a humorous way, so your child knows you want action but you aren't being punitive. "Either the cat's smarter than I thought or you left the milk carton open on the counter. One of you please put it back before it spoils."
- **Don't use power unless it's urgent.** Parents have the ultimate power, and kids know it. You don't have to "prove" it to them at every turn. Save your strength for those really important issues you've decided are non-negotiable. Eventually, your kids are going to possess power of their own, and you want them to be able to use it wisely.

— Source: H.E.L.P. How to Enjoy Living with a Preadolescent and MORE H.E.L.P., published by the National Middle School Association; [www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org).