



Parenting School-Age Children

During the middle years of your youngster's childhood, many changes will occur within the family. Your child is more independent than before, better able to care for herself, and more capable of contributing to chores and other household responsibilities. Most families discover that routines can be established, and in many ways life seems more settled. However, youngsters still need parental supervision and guidance.

During the middle childhood years, parents have two tasks that are especially important. The first is learning to allow and encourage your child to enter the new world of school and friends alone. The second is learning to be parents at a distance. Once children enter school, parents spend less than half as much time with them as they did before. Parents thus need to be more efficient, more vigilant, and still very much involved in their children's lives in order to monitor, guide, and support them effectively.

During the school years your youngster may develop more self-confidence, overcome fears and self-doubts, test the limits of her autonomy, find role models, and learn and internalize moral and spiritual values. You and the rest of the family should pay particular attention to the following areas, which will become increasingly significant during this time of life:

School

School assumes a central role in your youngster's life when she reaches the age of five or six, drawing much of her attention and energy away from the family unit. Her elementary-school years can become a time of enormous satisfaction and excitement. As she learns to read and master other academic skills, she will develop a love of learning and a pride in her achievements. This can contribute to her self-esteem, not only because of her accomplishments in the classroom but also as she separates successfully from the home environment. In the process her teacher can become a source of support and an important role model in her life.

For some children, however, school may cause frustration and stress. Learning disabilities can interfere with the joy of learning. Poor study habits and/or a lack of motivation can create academic difficulties. Sometimes youngsters may have a poor relationship with their teachers, or they may experience separation anxiety that can interfere with their school attendance.

To make your own child's education as positive and productive as possible, closely monitor her academic progress and social adjustment, and get to know her teacher. Discuss with your child what she is learning in the classroom and how she feels about school. Encourage her to demonstrate her newly learned skills and to practice them with you. Supervise your child's homework (but don't do it for her), and make sure she is preparing herself well for tests. Limit the amount of television she watches and encourage her to read, write, and express herself creatively through hobbies and sports. If she (or her teacher) reports any problem areas, communicate openly with school personnel, and try to figure out how best to help your youngster overcome her difficulties. Consult your pediatrician for suggestions to help solve these problems.

Friendships

As important as your child's family is to her, friends and acquaintances will become increasingly significant during middle childhood. She will spend more time with her peers, both in and out of school. These playmates will provide companionship, and your youngster will probably become preoccupied with being socially accepted by her friends. She will feel a strong need for both conformity (to be just like the others) and recognition (to be seen as unique).

Your family will also have to deal with the stresses associated with your child's peer relationships. From time to time she may have conflicts with friends, which can undermine her self-esteem. Maybe she will be excluded from a circle that she really wants to be a part of, leading to unhappiness and loneliness.

During these years, monitor your child's choice of friends and supervise, but do not interfere with, her play activities. Get to know her friends' parents and share with them your observations about the children's activities. Offer support, understanding, and guidance to your child when problems arise in her peer relationships. When a conflict occurs, try to understand how your child feels about it, and what she sees as the factors contributing to it. Then discuss how the

other child might view the problem, and together work out ways to resolve the conflict. At the same time keep in mind that the family cannot solve every peer-related difficulty—for example, you cannot run to the playground and intervene whenever a conflict arises. Even so, you can offer support and guidance, conveying your own values and expectations.

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Outside Activities

During middle childhood your youngster will develop a number of outside interests, from sports to Scouting, from music lessons to clubs. Many of these activities will require a commitment on the family's part, in terms of time and, in some cases, money. It may also require parental patience and tolerance as children experiment with different programs before finding the ones they prefer.

In general, the family—most particularly the parents—should be willing to support the child with resources, encouragement, supervision, chauffeuring, and, at times, direct participation.

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