



Students of middle school age are very complex. They are in the midst of physical, emotional, and social growth that seems to change on a daily basis. Some of the characteristics of middle school students follows:

- ◆ They show quite different levels of physical maturity.
- ◆ They are frequently self-conscious
- ◆ Sometimes they appear to be awkward.

- ◆ They may seem lazy at times.
- ◆ They may be difficult and uncooperative sometimes.
- ◆ Mood changes are not unusual.

- ◆ "Small things" may upset them to the point of tears or anger.
- ◆ Often they become over-critical of parents, teachers, and themselves.
- ◆ They are often convinced that adults know little about life.

- ◆ They want independence, but they enjoy the security of childhood.
- ◆ They can be responsible and capable one day and childish the next.
- ◆ They often want help, yet they often resent being told what to do.

- ◆ They often contradict and argue about things parents, siblings, teachers, and even friends may say.
- ◆ Often they dislike chores and may balk when asked to help, yet they are likely to be polite and helpful to people outside the family.
- ◆ Most respond best to adults who laugh and joke with them.

- ◆ They young persons hold their age mates in high esteem. Peer acceptance and belonging are very important. This sometimes can strain their relationships with adults.
- ◆ They, as with people of all ages, respond well to love, kindness, respect, and care.
- ◆ They usually want to be regarded and treated as emerging adults rather than as children.

- **HELPFUL HINTS WHEN COMMUNICATING WITH TEENS**

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- Be honest in telling them what he or she did well.
- Praise only those efforts and behaviors you sincerely believe were well executed.
- Offer gentle, but firm and respectful constructive ways to improve other efforts and behavior.
- Help correct ineffective behavior by offering alternative behaviors.
- Offer two positive suggestions for every suggestion for improvement.
- Begin and end feedback with a positive statement.
- Be specific about what was actually said or done.
- Be specific about why the action or behavior was or would be effective.
- Be clear about what could have been said or done instead, if constructive criticism is offered.
- Listen to your teens with full attention, not just with your ears, but with all of your senses—employ direct eye contact.
- Don't say something was well done when you don't believe it was.
- Don't guess at motives or assume anything. Ask direct questions and explore all opportunities to allow them to talk about how they think and feel.
- Don't focus exclusively on ineffective behaviors or only on positive behaviors.
- Ask for specific examples.
- View each opportunity as a learning experience for all involved.
- Don't reject feedback when you disagree... model receiving feedback in a non-defensive manner.
- Be curious about differing views, yet be clear and firm about your own values, views, and family rules.
- Ask for clarification.
- Paraphrase the content of the teen's message to check if you are hearing what they intend to say.
- Provide words for feelings and the affective part of what the teen struggles to articulate, for example "It can make some people really angry to talk about how they dress. I am wondering how you feel?"
- Periodically assess understanding of the message you are trying to convey.
- Ask the teen about how they can apply this message to their own stories and life experiences.
- Ask open-ended questions. Use what, when, where, why, and how to begin questions and not will, do, does, would, and have. The first group invites elaboration; the second elicits limited yes or no responses.
- Normalize the feelings of your teen and reassuring them by saying, "Many kids feel like you do..."
- Balance statements which offer opportunity for openness. Say things like, "Some teens feel scared and frustrated about this while others feel excited and energized by this."

It is important to set goals that are able to help the teen change behavior when necessary, as well as to plan for his or her future. Help your teen succeed by making sure that goals are manageable, realistic, specific and measurable, flexible, and successively more challenging.¹