

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

The "Be-tween" Years: Tips for Parents of Pre-Teens

Are you confused by your nine-year-old daughter's sudden interest in shopping, nail polish and fashion magazines? Are you feeling a bit "put out" by your ten-year-old son's messy room with the "do not enter" sign on the door? Chances are that if you have a child between the ages of 9 and 12, you may have noticed a few changes recently—in their interests, personal space, and how they communicate.

Although these kinds of changes in behaviour may be a source of frustration for some parents, the reality is that these changes are fairly universal among pre-teens—sometimes referred to as "tweens"—as they begin to develop their own sense of identity in the world around them.

Below are a few tips for parents that may help smooth the "tween" transition:

Offer space and privacy. Understand that what may seem like withdrawal is a pre-teen's way of saying: "I am in the process of finding out about myself." The best thing a parent can do is respect a pre-teen's need for space and privacy. Try allowing your pre-teen a place where he or she can feel a sense of independence. For many people this is the bedroom; one room in the house where they feel they can develop a sense of identity.

Tweens and clutter go hand-in-hand. As pre-teens begin to develop a sense of who they are, they begin to acquire belongings that reflect their own individual personality. While mementos scattered throughout their room, such as photos, posters, cards, notes, etc., may appear as clutter to you, remember that to your pre-teen, they are reflections of his or her young life.

Pick your battles. Ask yourself if your pre-teen's choice in music, or his or her messy room is really as big an issue as skipping school, taking dares that are risky, or dangerous activities. If you over-react to smaller issues, your tween is much less likely to come to you when he or she confronts a real dilemma or problem. Try holding firm on the more important standards but be more flexible with matters that aren't as important in the big scheme of things.

Listen, really listen. Be an active listener and offer your complete attention for matters big or small. Resist the urge to belittle seemingly "silly" problems and try to keep an open mind. Focus in on what your pre-teen is really telling you—and whether he or she is feeling insecure, stressed, excited, etc.—and respond with empathy and understanding.

Send the right message. During these years, parents can be vocal about behavioural changes in their children that they don't agree with, so it's important to offer praise and admiration for your pre-teen's abilities and achievements as often as possible.

The "tween" years can be a trying time for parents and children alike. By giving your child some space, and creating an atmosphere of open communication and honesty, you'll ensure your child takes those first steps toward independence without too many big battles, and that as your relationship shifts and changes, it remains, at the core, intact.

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