

Faith



Life Actually By Kari Kampakis

What middle school parents should know

I'm a fairly typical mom in how I felt when my child started middle school.

I'd heard the horror stories and also the funny stories, like one mom telling me how she still gets hives when she drives by her child's junior high.

Fortunately, we've had a good experience so far. The biggest challenge for my daughter has been learning to manage a demanding schedule, while the challenge for me is figuring out my role as a mom and how I need to change as my kids grow up.

My primary advice to my daughter was simple: "Make good choices, and don't worry about being popular or fitting in with the cool crowd. Just make good choices that set you up for a positive future." In my opinion, middle school is a launching pad. It's where a child starts to make life-shaping decisions that determine the direction their life will go.

While good choices launch them in a positive direction, poor choices launch them in a negative direction. Clearly all kids will make mistakes, but learning early from these mistakes can make all the difference in the path they ultimately take.

Parenting a middle schooler is different than parenting a small child. Here are a few things I have learned in this chapter we are in.

1. Your child is changing - and so is your relationship

If you ever attend a junior high assembly, I encourage you to notice the difference between grades. The contrast is drastic because so many changes happen at once (physically, emotionally and mentally) in this season of growth spurts.

The parent your child needs at age 4 or 10 is different than the parent they'll need at 14 or 18. Just as your child is in constant transition, so is your relationship. Our job as parents is to help our kids not need us, to work ourselves out of a job by cultivating self-sufficient young adults who have character, coping skills and a strong work ethic.

Obviously, middle schoolers need guidance and protection, but they also need opportunities to make their own decisions, handle their own conflicts and grow to be independent. In an age of helicopter parenting, it can be hard to loosen the reins, but sometimes we have to step back, notice the growth taking place and give them a little more rope.

2. Your middle schooler still needs your voice (and presence) in their life

Just as it's easy to be the parent who does too much, it's easy to be the parent who doesn't do enough. As your child pulls away from you and starts turning to friends and others for support and advice, it can be tempting to become hands-off and adopt a mindset of "I'll let them figure it out."

But the truth is, they still need your guidance. Nobody cares about your child's well-being the way you do, and even their best friends will be looking out for themselves.

Middle schoolers get pulled in a lot of directions. They're surrounded by voices that scream for their attention. Our gift as parents is to speak the truth in love, have their back and help them tune into that quiet voice inside them that helps them stay true to themselves and stay on track.

3. You still need a village

Last year I spoke to a group of young moms at my church. Many had babies on their laps, and I could sense a real camaraderie. It was refreshing to see this solidarity among moms who love each other *and* each other's kids.

I encouraged them to maintain their support system because as kids get older, the village often weakens. Competition and jealousy amp up as you have 50 kids showing real talent apply for 10 spots. With a middle schooler, it's important to know who's in your corner, who you can openly talk to and who you can count on for the truth. It's also important to be trustworthy and genuinely hope for other people's kids to succeed.

4. Like your middle schooler, you will face peer pressure — the pressure to parent like everyone else

Sometimes parenting is lonely. Sometimes doing the right thing for your child — like not letting them attend a party where you suspect there may be trouble — can make you the odd parent out. You may be the only parent not giving in, the only one whose child is mad at them.

It's a tough position, but if we're parenting correctly we'll all feel alone in our choices sometimes and tempted to cave for the wrong reasons. None of us will agree on everything, and that is okay. The popular thing to do may not be the right thing for your family, so trust your gut and parent in a way that feels right to you.

5. Every middle schooler has the potential to be an awesome adult. They want someone who believes in them and loves them exactly

as they are

Teenagers are notorious for eye rolls, mood swings and pushing the limits. They can be difficult, challenging and stubborn.

While we certainly need to notice and work on the weaknesses/landmines that can hurt our children or ruin their opportunities, we should also see the good. We should remember that when God looks at us, He sees potential. He sees who we can *become* and loves us according to that.

In just a few years, middle schoolers start to look grown up. But even as they physically mature, even as they grow world-savvy and self-sufficient, they still have emotional needs. They still want us to show up for their games, express love and affection, and engage them in meaningful conversations that make them feel heard, valued and understood.

Middle schoolers long to hear, "I'm proud of you, and I love who you're becoming." So let's look for opportunities to share that message, let's build them up with words and actions, and let's remember that they are searching and listening, hungry for guidance on who they should be and which direction their lives should take.

Kari Kubiszyn Kampakis is a Mountain Brook mom of four girls, columnist and blogger for The Huffington Post. Her two books for teen and tween girls — "Liked: Whose Approval Are You Living For?" and "10 Ultimate Truths Girls Should Know" — are available on Amazon and everywhere books are sold. Join her Facebook community at "Kari Kampakis, Writer," visit her blog at karikampakis.com or contact her at kari@karikampakis.com.



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