

School and the “Tween” Stage
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Historically, the ‘tween stage’ (from ages eight to thirteen) was given little consideration. It was viewed by psychologists and child development experts as the “in-between” time that occurs between the fervor of early childhood development and the whirlwind of adolescence. But, parents today know that the alleged “quiet” period could not be further from the truth.

The only quiet that occurs has the effect of making parents feel left out and confused. A child who was once a “chatterbox” may develop into a “tween” who tends not to reveal much about herself in conversation, and offers a shrug, a vague nod or uncertain shakes of the head as standard replies. Whether as a literal saying or a conveyed attitude, “whatever” becomes a standard communication. Although it feels to parents that their tweens are not expressing themselves as much as they did during early childhood and will undoubtedly do as teenagers, the difference is that tweens more readily express themselves via actions rather than words.

This stage of development also converges with changes in school expectations – more emphasis is placed on academic achievement and there are greater expectations around both academic and social performance. In or around third grade is when school becomes more visible and parents’ worries start to surface. The school may be calling with concerns, notes may be coming home from teachers, and your child may have meltdowns over homework or friendship issues. School does not mean “smooth sailing” for every child. You can help, but first it’s important to understand your child’s needs so you can effectively assist in promoting his or her healthy development in school. Remember, outside of the family, school is the biggest influence in your tween’s life.

The child who does well in school and then develops reluctance to get up in the morning, has stomachaches or headaches or won’t do school work, is not atypical during this “tween” time. It is up to the parent to investigate further. Is there a conflict between your child and the teacher? Is there a child in the classroom who is taunting, teasing or bullying your child? Has your child been punished for some behavior and now feels ashamed or embarrassed? These are issues that can be explored through teacher conferences, meetings with guidance staff or questions to siblings about what they know of the teacher, situation, circumstance, etc.

As parents, we may strongly disagree with a teacher’s policies and procedures, but we can best help our ‘tweens’ by assisting them in making the best of the situation or guiding them in asserting themselves appropriately. This way, we provide an opportunity for a life lesson.

The next time your child is in an unpleasant situation or environment, give him or her some tools to manage the situation. It is very challenging for most parents to refrain from stepping in and remedying or fixing the problem. We don’t want to see our children hurt, troubled or upset. Yet, to “fix” every problem that the ‘tween’ will encounter would lead only to an adolescent, young-adult, or adult who is ill-equipped or unprepared to deal with difficult situations. Youngsters are bound to encounter some unpleasant people in positions of authority and many frustrating situations during the course of their lives. Learning to cope during childhood is the best time to learn, while parents are present to provide guidance, advice, modeling and support.

Even if your 'tween' doesn't grasp how very important education is for the future, the social cues of whether your child is successful, popular, fits in or admired is fully understood. This is the stage of development where children start to carve paths for themselves that can affect self-esteem. To insure that your child is not influenced by peer values that support doing poorly in school, you must have a strong, solid relationship with him or her. Understand that your 'tween' is primarily centered in the here-and-now moment. Engaging in "the motivational talk" to inspire a love of learning and an understanding of how it will help in the future, may fall flat. Engaging in "active listening" will provide a cornerstone upon which your relationship with your 'tween' can survive and thrive.