

Make Your Home Preteen Friendly

The preteen and early teen years are difficult ones for kids and for parents. As a middle school counselor, I counsel adolescents daily about these age-related struggles and challenges. The good news is that most kids do make it through adolescence with little or no permanent scars. Here are some basics for parents to keep in mind for creating a home environment that is both safe and engaging for their eleven to fifteen year olds.

Communication

Some preteens, particularly boys, are not used to being invited to participate in conversation. It's crucial that parents ask their kids to tell them about what they did in school and after school. Adults should ask for and validate the preteen's opinions. Parents may need to be persistent without nagging and expect more than one-word responses. Sometimes it helps to begin a conversation with a topic that is sure to interest your son or daughter such as fashion, sports, or music. Another idea is to plan at least one activity a month with your child of his or her choosing where talking and listening can occur, perhaps the mall or a baseball game. Even if parents hope their 12-year-old changes his or her mind about becoming a model, rock star or professional wrestler, parents need to listen without judgment to their kids hopes and ideas.

We, parents, need to talk to our kids about the dangers of substance abuse and teenage sex. It can be harmful to assume they have all the facts and understand the consequences of experimentation. It is likely, before kids finish eighth grade, they will be forced to make choices with potential serious consequences. It's only natural that preteens will make some mistakes on their own, rather than listen to words of wisdom from their parents and teachers. Parents need to let their kids know they can and should come to them no matter what problem they may be experiencing. Even kids from the most stable homes need to be reminded of this.

Homework

Speaking as an educator, I can assure parents that most middle school students will be assigned some homework to do nightly. Parents should ask preteens about their homework and provide support and a conducive environment for studying. Moms and dads should find a respectable balance between taking over and doing their preteens' homework for them and not having a clue as to what their kids are studying.

It's helpful to set up a spot and time in your home for homework doing. This area should be at a well lit, quiet desk or table. Parents can assist in keeping a homework area available so preteens won't find preparing for studying such a daunting task. A nightly routine will encourage responsibility and study habits. It also reinforces your commitment to your child's education especially if you involve your child in setting up the routine. The preteen may have some requests from you and his or her siblings during that time.

Parents and preteens can work together in making this time sacred to your family and your household.

If the preteen claims never to have homework, parents should take that as a hint to call to arrange a conference with his or her teachers and not wait for the next report card even if the child has historically been a good student.

TV

Let's face it, much of what is being presented in the media these days is not what we want our still-impressionable kids watching. Parents are encouraged to watch TV with their kids in a common area of the home. In my opinion, children don't benefit from having a television in their own rooms. If it's not always feasible to watch TV as a family, parents should at least be aware of what their kids are soaking up from TV.

Television can be a great teaching tool for letting your children know what you value and consider responsible choices and behavior. It can be a springboard for conversation. Parents can involve their kids in setting certain hours for TV watching in the home. If kids are in front of the TV all afternoon and all weekend, that means, they aren't doing their homework or getting exercise and fresh air.

Internet

Even more so than television, we need to monitor and perhaps limit Internet access to our kids. Many homes now have computers, but again, we should think twice about letting our kids have Internet access in their bedrooms. Thank goodness for technology, but all is not good on the Internet for our kids. Besides being a constantly updated encyclopedia at our fingertips, the Internet also contains pornography and hate and violence propaganda. Unfortunately, it can even put our children at risk for child predators and abusers. Parents need to be proactive and make the Internet an amazing resource and learning tool without causing harm to their children.

Parents can visit these sites for more information about how to protect children from the negative factors of the Internet, www.fbi.gov/library/pguid/pguidee.htm and www.microweb.com/pepsite/Software/filters.htm.

During the early years of childhood, we parents are so concerned with making a safe physical surrounding for infants, toddlers and preschoolers. As children grow and their needs change, we must remind ourselves that our goals actually remain the same, that is, to keep our kids safe and thriving through each development stage, including adolescence. We want them to do their best and avoid what is potentially harmful to them. Children of all ages need boundaries and guidance. Open and continuous communication as well as a safe and engaging home life will help ensure preteens positive growth and happiness.

Article by Louise Hajjar Diamond in the American School Counselor Association Journal