

insights



Parenting the in-between years

by Michael Grose

The in-between 'tween' years can be challenging for parents. Here's 5 ways for parents to negotiate these years.

Toddlers and teenagers have traditionally been the stages that are most problematic for parents. Toddlers have a bad reputation as their body outgrows their brain, which is testing for a parent's patience and their ability to manage behaviour. The teen period with its massive physical and emotional changes requires parents to make significant changes to their parenting and communication methods. Personally, this was a stage that tested my communication skills to the limit. It seemed that every conversation with one of my teenage children was like going for a job interview. I had to concentrate on every word I said to make sure there was no misinterpretation or argument.

There's a third stage that causes stress and anxiety for parents – the tween stage. This is the age from 8 – 12-year-olds that bridges childhood and adolescence and it often goes under the radar when we talk about stressful developmental stages.

Tween issues are complex

The issues that parents face when raising toddlers such as sleep, obstinance, eating and separation worries seem simple compared to the complexities that parents face with tweens including social media, bullying, friendships and puberty.

This is an age when kids are maturing at different speeds, which can impact dramatically on how they see themselves. It seems also that the relationship between girls and their mothers can be strained during this stage, although dads and daughters aren't immune from testy times either. Boys also have difficulty negotiating this age but they have an innate naivety, which saves them from much of the angst that many girls face.

This is a stage when children need their parents but the shift to puberty and the accompanying social pressures means you may have to shift your parenting gears well before you are ready.

Here are five ideas to help you stay connected to your tween:

1. Spend real & close time together

Most kids are great when you get them one-on-one, but getting the chance to spend some time away from a digital device or screen with a young person today is seriously hard. But close personal time is how you can talk to your child and provide the support they need during these times of transition. Make the opportunity to spend some idle, chatting time with your tween.

2. Allow them to have two faces

Many children in the in-between years wear two faces. They have a face for the outside world of their peers and one for home and their family. The outside face maybe a little older, and have more attitude than you'd like, so try to gently manipulate that face into something softer. Recognise that the tough or older exterior maybe his or her way of coping or gaining acceptance. On the other hand, you may find your tween acts and plays like a young child while at home. Make room for this to happen.

3. Create the path for greater independence

Many children at this age want more freedom and independence, but they frequently don't know how to ask for it. Recognise that healthy development at this stage involves expanding their horizons into different areas of endeavour (hobbies, interests, subjects at school) and around their neighbourhood. Set limits, and expect them to stick to them. Give them more responsibility, not less as they move into the tween years.

4. Explain the changes that are going on

Puberty begins as young as eight for some girls, a little later for boys. It begins before we see any changes to body shape or form. Many children battle their physiology (and their feelings) at this stage, while we parents focus on their psychology ("What's he trying out now?") so calmly explain the changes that are going on while teaching them how to manage their emotions.

5. Remember, it's not personal

I haven't met a parent who doesn't take the cutting/sarcastic/hurtful remarks that a tween can make personally. That's why parenting tweens can be hard emotional labour. It can also be a sad time as your child is moving from one stage to the next. In a sense, you give birth twice – to a child first and then again to a teen. The second gestation is longer and in some ways more painful. But life does get better and more bearable with time.

Most parents are raising tweens when they have a lot going on in their own lives. Partners, work, friends and broader family are competing for your attention at the very time when your tween maybe challenging you. If you can simplify your life even just a little during this stage you may find that the some of the stresses of raising a tween start to disappear or at least seem less complex and hard to bear.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's the author of 10 books for parents including *Thriving!* and the best-selling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*, and his latest release *Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children*. A trailblazer in the parenting and educational scenes Michael regularly appears in the media throughout Australia in programs including *The Project*, *The Today Show* and ABC radio.