

Want to keep your new middle-schooler out of trouble? Then let them take risks

By Michelle Icard August 20, 2014

Middle school gets a bad rap.

Ask parents of graduating elementary-schoolers how they feel about their kids moving up, and you'll be surprised how many of their responses fall into the "totally dreading it" end of the anticipation spectrum.

What's so scary about middle school anyway? I mean, besides hormones, attitudes, peer pressure, emerging sexuality, defiance, exposure to drugs and alcohol... Um, okay. I get it. Middle school can be scary. But there is a lot to love about middle school, too. One of my favorites is that middle school can offer a buffet of new experiences, and kids should try them all. (Scratch that: No drugs and sex. But they should try a lot.)

Parents worry too much when their kids start listening to hard-core rap, or dyeing their hair strange colors, or making unlikely new friends. Instead, middle school should be seen as an important time to let kids begin to develop their identities apart from their parents. Who a child will become is not a foregone conclusion, and without trying a lot of new things, how can a young person truly know who she is? She has to test some limits. While it can be strange to see this happening, know that it's happening for good reason.

Your kid doesn't just want to take risks. She *needs* to take risks.

At around the age of 11, kids' brains start undergoing some amazing, albeit messy, reorganization. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for impulse control, critical thinking and evaluating other people's emotions (to name just a few of its important jobs) goes on vacation during the teen years. That's when the amygdala, or emotional center of the brain, kindly takes over the decision-making department. This makes perfect sense when you consider how impulsive, reactive and dramatic middle-schoolers can be.

It's not a fluke that kids become more impulsive in middle school. As tweens prepare to take their first big steps on the path toward independent thoughts and behavior, the adolescent brain can't be dedicated to worrying about risk. Becoming an independent adult, after

all, requires a lot of bravery, something impulse control tends to squelch. Put plainly, if your kid's prefrontal cortex were highly functioning throughout adolescence, she would never consider leaving the comfort of home for college. Why should she take that risk when everything she needs to survive is at her fingertips under your roof?

Let them check the risk box

Understanding why middle-schoolers are driven toward risk-taking is helpful, but knowing how to keep them safe is even better. While a middle-schooler's brain can't tell the difference between a good risk and a bad risk, the good news is that it's equally satisfied by both. You've probably heard that kids who play sports are less likely to engage in negative risky behavior. That is not because they're too busy to find time to misbehave. (Note: This is not a call to sign your child up for every after school activity you can find. Being busy doesn't satisfy the

adolescent need to take risks.) Instead, that's because athletes are already taking risks on the field, so they've checked that box. And don't fret if your kid isn't a jock. Auditioning for a play, joining a new club, starting a baby-sitting business, or doing anything else that takes a kid out of his comfort zone will fulfill that risk-taking drive.

Often, parents think middle school is the time to clamp down and impose lots of limits, because they are fearful of their child making

dangerous and impulsive decisions. Certainly, limits are appropriate, but they should be balanced with lots of encouragement to try new things. Yes, this will get messy. Switching friends, changing activities, dressing in all black, and hopping from obsession to obsession will make waves, leaving people, time and money in the wake. With any risk, good or bad, there are challenges. But consider the alternative. Kids who don't belly up to the buffet and try new things, new friends, new styles and new behaviors may be compelled to try something worse. Or at the very least, they may get left behind by their peers, or miss getting a foothold in a fun new activity.

You can't always protect them, but you can comfort them.

When my daughter was in fifth grade she auditioned for the school talent show. Though she had been an adorable performer during her early elementary years, this time I was nervous. By fifth grade, she had hit her awkward phase pretty hard. Her singing voice, on which she prided herself for years, had changed from cute and clear to a strangled, nasally something. "If she sings," I thought, "she will mortify herself and people will tease her relentlessly."

I so badly wanted to protect her from taking a risk that might get her ostracized, and I debated with myself for days over whether I should discourage her in order to protect her. And then it occurred to me,

“Either way, she’ll be hurt. Don’t let it be by me.” Kids would tease, for this or for something else later on, and I wanted to always be her champion. Turns out, she did audition, she made the cut and both her nerves and the terrible cafeteria acoustics kindly muffled her voice enough that the performance was pretty unmemorable – in a good way. She has only happy memories of this event. I am so glad I kept my mouth shut.

So, if you and your tween are staring down the reality of life in middle school, start welcoming the changes coming your way, and not dreading them. Let them sing. Let them go Goth. Let them wear shorts all winter long. They’re just trying to figure out who they are, and that’s hard work. They’ll be grateful you’re by their side when all that work is done.

Michelle Icard is the author of [Middle School Makeover: Improving the Way You and Your Child Experience the Middle School Years](#). Her web site is www.MichelleintheMiddle.com.

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