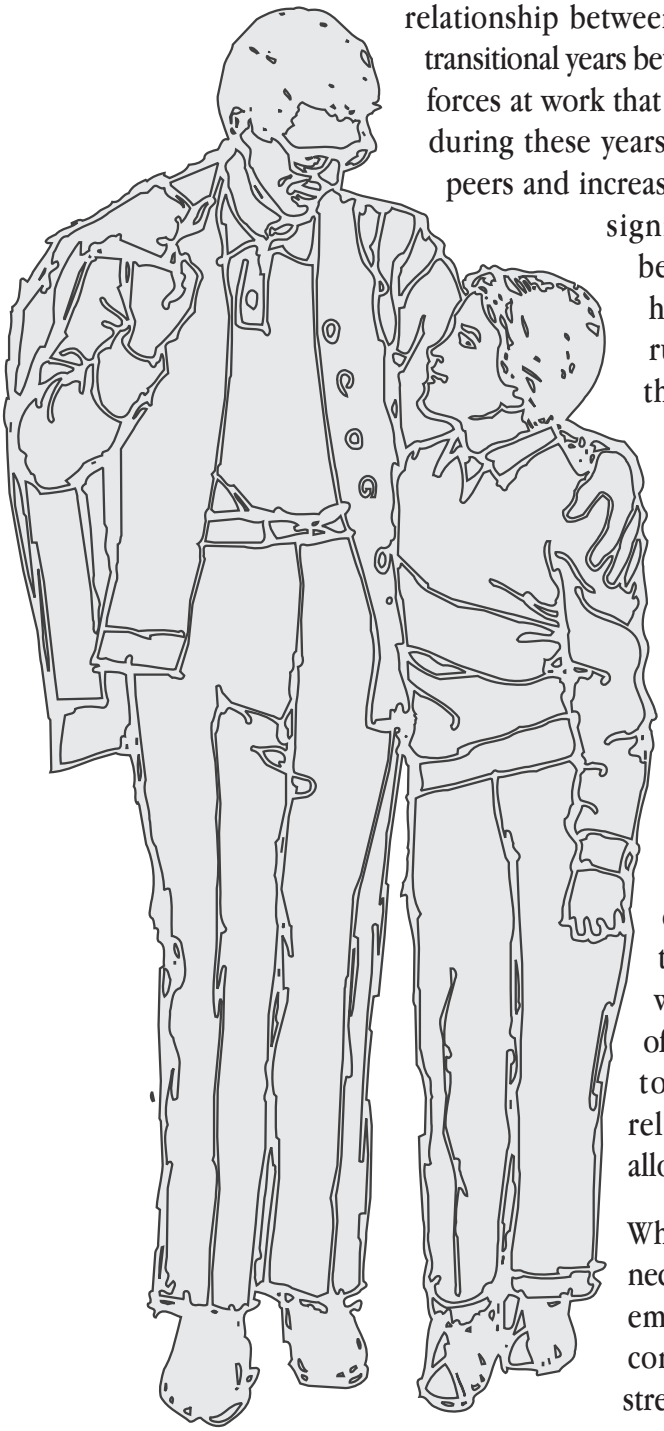
5 Using Effective Parenting to Guide Your Child through Transitions

A. The Main Components of a Positive Relationship

Affection, Attachment, and **A Positive Relationship**–It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of a close, positive relationship between parents and children for the transitional years between 11 and 14. There are many forces at work that pull parents and children apart during these years. Children's intense interest in peers and increased need for privacy can lead to significantly diminished contact between parents and kids. The heightened questioning of family rules and values by children and the arguments that ensue can rupture relationships. A parent's discomfort with the emerging sexuality of a child and uncertainty about discussing complex topics with him or her may lead to brief, superficial communications.



No matter what the source, it is important that parents work to counteract the forces that pull family members into individual orbits. Although kids need time to themselves and more contact with peers, a reasonable amount of contact within families is needed to ensure that parent-child relationships are supportive and allow for guidance.

Why is a positive relationship necessary? For several reasons. First, emotional support and pleasant contacts help children overcome stress. Good family relations help a

child relax and gain solace when needed, and peer relations may be too variable to supply stable positive contacts. Positive contacts foster good health for all humans, so why should pre-teens and teens have limited access to them?

Second, as parents you are able to understand your child's struggles and provide meaningful advice only if you have paid your dues. You have to make the supposedly "meaningless" contacts that take up 95% of the time in order to get to soulful contacts about your child's real concerns. A child in this age group will not listen to your ideas well unless she believes you really know her.

Third, positive contacts help you see past squabbles and disagreements. Even in the midst of fights, you will know that you care for each other. Finally, positive contacts seem essential in fostering high levels of self-esteem and resistance to risky behaviors. Involvement by parents plays a crucial role in distinguishing kids that are doing well from kids who have diminished mental health and who engage in risky behaviors.

To establish and maintain a positive relationship, we recommend using **Affection** and **Attachment**. How do you do that?

- Express your affection. You do not have to be flowery or fake, just make sure you let your children know that you love them and care about them. Make sure you do not do this in public. Don't expect a similar response in return, but tell about your love often enough so your child does not forget it.

- Make time for affectionate contacts. Schedule some time to do things that you both enjoy, or, at the very least, that your child enjoys. This gives you the chance to enjoy each other's company. You don't have to talk much, just do some activities together on a regular basis without too much time between contacts.

- Gather together as a family for a meal or activity as often as possible, but no less than once or twice a week. Make this a requirement and make sure that you fulfill that requirement. Make this activity calm and comfortable.

- Recognize your child's accomplishments. Make positive comments on little things and big things. It is very easy to put parenting on auto pilot. But don't forget to thank them for using manners,

treating others with respect, completing homework and helping around the house. When big accomplishments occur, don't go overboard (remember most pre-teens and teens are uncomfortable being the center of adult attention), but remember to provide some praise.

Build an attachment. Be familiar with your child's interests and activities. Try to at least listen to his or her favorite music. You don't have to like it, but ask him to tell what he likes about it. Consider playing the video games your child enjoys. Where does your child hang out and with whom? Find out how relationships are going with others. In other words, stay involved in your child's life and find out what he is doing on a day-to-day basis.

Use your attachment to support your child. Ask your child about any stresses and strains. Be available for discussions about worries and difficulties. **Learn to listen without giving directions or advice**.

Protect your attachment. Be careful how you respond when your child has angered you or made a mistake or broken a rule. Tell your child what actions you did not like, follow through with consequences and appropriate punishment, but don't call your child names, tell her she is stupid or insult her entire character. Such negative confrontations drive a wedge into your relationship. The alienation experienced in those confrontations and the gap between you that develops may become unbridgeable if it gets to be too wide.

Seek out some neutral or pleasant contact even when your relationship is strained. Ask your child to suspend any anger and just spend some fun time together. Try to suspend your own harsh feelings too. You don't need to be fake and you should not drop any punishments, but try to stay in some contact.

Remember that your child may have some pretty harsh, trying experiences during the middle school years. If you have a supportive relationship, home can be a secure place that can be used by your child as a base for exploration. Your child can refuel on support in that setting, get good advice on where to venture, return for comfort when wounded, and gain bravery from your praise so that he is ready to go back into the fray. Your positive relationship can protect and inspire him.

B. Guidance and Discipline for the Transitions

1. Physical Transitions

The physical changes of puberty present many challenges to pre-teens and teens. Knowing about those challenges helps you guide your children on a smoother course. Use part **A**, your positive relationship, as a means of discussing these challenges and of providing your child with guidance and skills for meeting them. For each of the challenges we have discussed, we have some suggestions. You will notice that our suggestions share common themes. We encourage you to talk openly with your children, make sure that they are informed and set guidelines for what you expect them to do. The suggestions use all parts of the A, B, C, and D's of parenting.

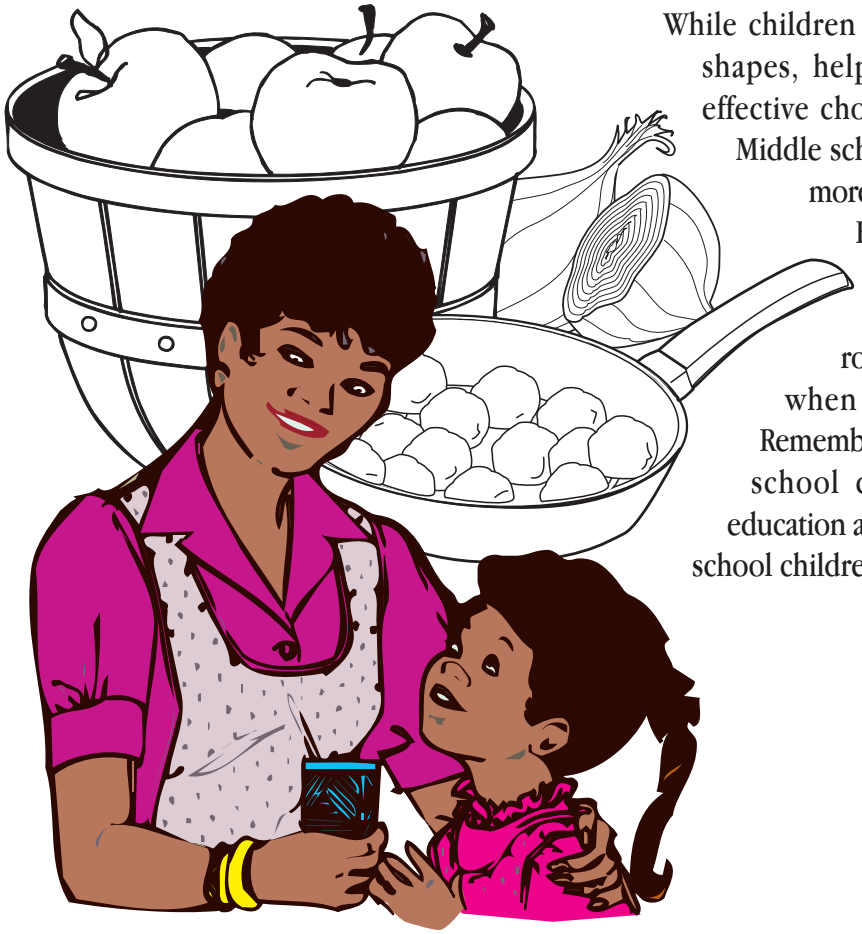
For changes in shapes and sizes, here are some ideas

Make sure that your child is well informed about what to expect. Kids will do well if they understand that a number of changes will take place over the next few years. An individual's course and pace is unpredictable. Help your children know that there may be times when he or she is not happy with the changes and that sometimes they may feel awkward and ugly. If you are not sure about the details or are uncomfortable discussing details with your children, find a good book to review together. Librarians and school health educators will have good recommendations.

Initiate conversations about the changes your child can expect and is experiencing. Kids may be too uncomfortable to ask questions or raise concerns. Just briefly check in to see how they are feeling and what they think about the changes. Listen for self-criticisms and help your child think carefully. It is not helpful to simply tell your child not to worry or to tell your child that the ideas are silly. Statements like that will only stop conversation and keep your child from talking again. Instead, support your child by indicating that many kids are temporarily unhappy with how they look and feel.

Try not to comment on the changes your child is experiencing to family, friends, or others when your child is around. Changing kids are very self-conscious and really want privacy. Telling family members that your daughter is now wearing a bra would be very distressing to your daughter. Stating that your son is "manly" because he is gaining some hair would be just as uncomfortable.

Keep track of your child's health during this time. Make sure that your child is growing well and is helping his body grow. During this time, some children gain weight, especially early maturing girls. Help children maintain healthy eating habits during this time, so there is no inappropriate restricting of foods or excessive eating. Children also can become more sedentary during this time. Pre-teens and teens do not have as many physical games (e.g. tag, hide-and-seek) that keep their interest as young children. Demonstrate a healthy life style, engage kids in interesting physical activities, and continue to exercise appropriate control over their meal time choices and the amount of snacking involved. If you suspect that your child is restricting her intake or is gaining too much weight, consult your pediatrician for recommendations. Your child can be in charge of day-to-day choices for activity and eating patterns, but you need to keep monitoring the overall picture. New evidence suggests that more, not less, parental involvement is required to help children with eating disorders or struggling with obesity to achieve a healthy status.



While children are growing into their adult shapes, help them learn to make more effective choices for eating and exercise. Middle school children will be spending more and more time away from you. Help them learn how to balance their diets and help them to develop some form of activity routine that they can follow even when they are away from home. Remember, even in school, most middle school children have less physical education and recess time than elementary school children.

For changes in sexual maturity, consider these practices

Talk about the changes. Make sure that your child knows what is likely to occur and what is occurring. A lot of the details have been reviewed in school sex education classes, but not all of that information sinks in with each child. So, talk and ask questions to make sure your child knows what changes are happening in his or her body.

Make sure that your middle school child knows about the most crucial changes: menstruation for girls and uncontrolled ejaculations for boys. These events should not be experienced without knowledge about what has occurred.

Talk about the meaning of the changes. Help your child understand that there may be an increase in sexual interest and sexual energy. Let your child know that the body has a pressing interest in using the "new equipment"; there are biological urges that wish to be expressed. These urges affect thinking and motivation, but, following through on them has significant emotional, social, educational, and economic effects.

Think about your guidelines for how your child should deal with sexual urges. Talk them over with your spouse or other caregivers. The issue may be uncomfortable, but you need to consider masturbation, sexual activities with peers and abstinence. What are the options that your child should consider and what are the appropriate actions according to your family's values? Let your child know what your guidelines are.

It is very important to think about sexual activity with peers. The actions kids are weighing in this age group are not as innocent as they used to be. Many kids are concerned about kissing and holding hands with a "crush." But, some kids are deciding whether or not to touch each others genitals, engage in oral sex or have intercourse. All of these activities have an impact on a kid's psychological well-being and physical health. Over the last decade, it appears that teens have understood messages that intercourse is tricky because of the potential for sexually-transmitted diseases and pregnancy, so the level of intercourse has leveled off. However, many teens report that

there are increases in oral sexual activity and these increases have been found in middle-school aged children. In particular, girls report increased pressure to engage in oral sex in order to be popular.

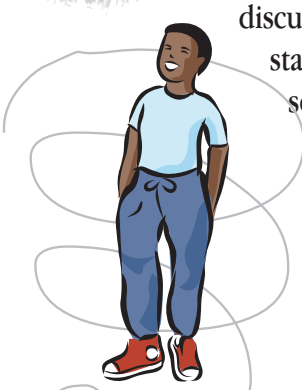
Consider that twenty percent of 15-years-olds report that they have had sexual intercourse. Most information suggests that 3/4 of teens that have had intercourse have also engaged in oral sex activity, and many teens use oral sex to avoid sexual intercourse. All of these facts suggest that even if a teen has not had intercourse, oral sex activity has probably been considered. Importantly, however, many teens do not know the risks of oral sexual activity. In national surveys, only 20% of sexually active teens knew that they could contract a sexually-transmitted disease through oral sexual practices. Your conversations need to contain very specific guidelines and very clear information about the risks associated with all forms of sexual activity.

Use times during your positive contacts to broach the topic of sexual development and sexual activity. Polls of teens indicate that they would like to receive advice from their parents about sexual activity, even though they will not initiate conversations and even though they know the conversations could be uncomfortable and embarrassing for them and their parents. There is no single "talk" that covers the topics. Parents used to fulfill their responsibilities by discussing the birds and bees or the mechanics of sexual activity—meaning intercourse, how it occurs, and when it is appropriate. Today, parents need to help their children make decisions about an array of sexual activities and about when and with whom to engage in sexual activity. Kids don't want to know just the "how's" of sex, but also the "why's," "when's," "with whom's,"

and "under what circumstances." Frequent positive contacts in which you briefly, but often, discuss their thinking and your guidelines are much more effective than a single, serious discussion.

Describe your guidelines for sexual activity clearly. Don't be vague. If you don't want your child to engage in kissing, say so. If kissing is okay, but hands on bodies is not, say so. Children report many opportunities to be in private contact with others. They will be making decisions about contact when you or other adults are not around. Equip them with clear guidelines so they know their boundaries. Kids may not always respect those boundaries, but if they have not been described there is even less chance that they will adhere to your values and beliefs.

For changes in peer relations because of sexual maturity, consider a few points



Be aware that your child's shape and size will be a topic of discussion or, at least, subject of a lot of thought. Your child's status in development may be a source of compliments, a source of friendly concern, and a source of teasing in peer contacts. Your child's feelings and concerns will be affected by how others are viewing him or her. So, events and conversations that you are not aware of will be affecting your child's mood and thoughts. Don't be surprised if your child is moody for reasons you can not even figure out.

Boys and girls that are sexually mature will be approached by others their age or older for dating and physical contact. Early maturing girls report that they are approached by others and receive sexual comments fairly often.

Dating and going steady are often considered in this age group. However, having an exclusive relationship and dating on a one-to-one basis is not considered healthy by a number of experts. Exclusive relationships are too complicated and too restrictive. Group "dating" in which members of the opposite sex get together in appropriately supervised situations is

considered much healthier. Group contacts foster social interactions and help kids in this phase of life learn about a variety of styles of interaction.

- Because of social pressure that is pervasive in our culture, teens often believe that they "must" be involved in physical contact. If your child has an interest in someone, help your child discuss what he or she thinks is appropriate and provide your guidelines. Let them know that physical contact does not have to be part of an early boyfriend or girlfriend relationship.

2. Mental Transitions

The mental transitions described earlier provide your pre-teen and teen with great power. Remember that your son or daughter is becoming more logical in his or her analysis of situations. He or she will also be critically reviewing many more experiences and rules and regulations. You are likely to encounter more arguments as a result and you may find your child challenging long-held family beliefs. A reasonable amount of heated discussions and arguments help teens establish independence in their thinking and ideas about themselves. However, higher levels of conflict can be avoided if you keep in mind that the challenging interactions are part of this phase of development.

- Be prepared for discussions, and some arguments, about your decisions and family traditions and rules. The topics for the discussions may relate to bedtime, being able to go to "R-rated" movies or what to wear to school. They may seem of little importance to you, but your child may have spent a long time considering how the old ideas were terribly unfair and unreasonable.

- Maintain your attachment in these discussions by making choices that keep your relationship with your child positive even when you are being challenged. Make sure that you listen carefully and respectfully to your child's point of view. If you disagree, clearly say why and what your reasoning is. Do not expect an easy resolution to some disagreements. You may believe that you have countered all of your child's points, so that she should easily concede. However, your child may not arrive at the same conclusion so quickly. Remember, although a pre-teen or early teen may be more logical, the skills are still developing. So, don't

expect concessions or an endorsement of your side of the discussion. Just ask your child to listen carefully to your point of view and ask her to consider your ideas. If you have listened to her ideas with respect, she is likely to think about your ideas calmly.

Be prepared to bolster your child's spirits and esteem as the mental changes occur. With increased critical thinking, middle-school aged kids review themselves and others harshly. They often think about minor imperfections, and they can be brutal in their analysis.

As a result, a documented decrease in self-esteem has been found in girls and boys at around the age of 12. Be ready to remind your child about his or her accomplishments and fine qualities. Be cautious in the way that you criticize your child. Make your point briefly and be very specific, such as: "I don't like it when you don't prepare for tests. I want to arrange a better study schedule." Kids can manage an honest appraisal of their mistakes, but they become angry and very discouraged when they receive a lecture on their failings.

3. Social Transitions

Remember that the transitions in a pre-teen's social life involve a move to heavy reliance on peers for entertainment, advice, support, and understanding of how the world operates. Reliance on parents will be changing dramatically. Try to use your positive relationship to remain connected to one another even while your child is pulling away. For other challenges during the social transition, consider these ideas for providing guidance, discipline and skills for your child.

Monitor your child's activities and contacts. Be aware of your child's friends and acquaintances. Don't ask for a tremendous amount of detail all of the time, but you should know who your child's good friends are. Get to know their names, their interests, and, at the best level of knowledge, get to know the friend's parents. Be aware of what your child is doing with friends. Develop some awareness of the people with whom your child has casual contact, so you know what peer influences are present.

Knowing your child's friends helps you keep track of the health of his or her peer relationships. You can see when your child is struggling with isolation or getting overly concerned about popularity.

Knowing about general activities gives you a chance to comment on what you think is appropriate and to help set guidelines for what activities should be pursued, how often and with what intensity.

When you learn about casual acquaintances, you learn about the people that may influence your child. You can listen carefully to brief stories to determine if the influences are positive or negative.

Be creative in your thinking about contacts. Of course, kids get together in face-to-face meetings and on the phone, but, remember that most kids are wired. Kids can and, often do, spend hours talking to peers over the internet. You would not let your child spend hours on the phone, yet many pre-teens and young teens spend entire evenings exchanging e-mails and instant messages over the internet. Make sure you know who the main contacts are and get some understanding of the topics under discussion.

Check in on the quality of your child's relationships by asking questions. Find out how he or she is getting along with others. Find out how your child is feeling about friendships and contacts. Be prepared to listen to bad news and feelings of hurt. Help your child realize that everyone experiences teasing and rejection during these years. Encourage your child to refrain from these actions. Watch out for excessive isolation if your child is struggling with peers.

Find out about healthy and unhealthy peer groups in your neighborhood. Some kids face the presence of gangs. These kids are sometimes the object of recruitment or threats and violence or offers to buy items the gang has for sale. Proactive parents and communities keep gangs in check and keep kids out of trouble. Encourage participation in pro-social groups.

For both boys and girls, a close friendship with one peer may develop. This friendship can be extremely important and supportive. The friend can also be extremely influential. Monitor the development of close friendships to make certain that your child's choice is a person that basically shares your values and will encourage healthy activities. Discuss your concerns about a friend if you believe that the other child is antisocial, engages in risky actions or encourages limited investment in school. Do not ban contact with this person unless you are certain your child is in danger of engaging in unhealthy actions. Instead, voice your concerns, ask your child to think about your perspective and limit contact so that your child is involved with your family or other friends more often.

Spell out expectations for the values and behaviors you want your children's friends to have. You do not have to make the choices of the peers that they spend time with, but let them know what choices you value.

Establish or re-establish family routines that result in regular contact and allow for discussions and updates. Have a least one family meal together each week, but strive for more than two. Develop a time for family meetings to discuss how everyone is doing. Try to make it work at least once every two weeks. Require that your children keep you updated on school performance, social activities and peer contacts.

For boys, peers can encourage assertiveness and a "take charge" approach to the world. The healthy aspects of this encouragement are numerous. Shy boys may be encouraged to take chances, meek boys may see new ways to meet challenges and overly passive boys may pursue new interests with more passion. The unhealthy aspects may contribute to boys taking loutish actions with peers, pushing and shoving and bullying others. Or, boys may be advised to take risks to show that they are "men." The risks can include dangerous actions in sports or stunts, or they may include forbidden "attractions" such as smoking, drinking, drug use or sexual exploits. Boys commonly experience pressure to take school achievement casually. Keep your ears and eyes open for these possibilities.

For girls, increased peer contact can help them achieve a balance in assertiveness and deferral. They may meet models for acting as a strong, independent person. They may also learn to negotiate social relationships without special status as someone's "little girl." They also learn to work cooperatively in groups. On the other hand, girls are likely to face hostile criticism from others, with exclusion from groups based on appearance, clothing, and, sometimes, family income. Young women can experience pressure to engage in sexual activity as well as pressure to change their friends or their appearance. The refrain that it is "not attractive" to be smart and studious often begins at this age.

For both boys and girls, increased peer contact will increase exposure to teasing and bullying.

Restrict peer contact when you know your child's friends are engaged in dangerous and unhealthy behaviors. Pre-teens and teens do not have strong self-control and may have trouble resisting pressure if a peer group has witnessed them engage in risky actions on previous occasions. The peers will expect the behavior to continue. Pull your child away from such peers until you are sure that your child has gained better self-control.

Set guidelines for how much peer contact there can be, and make sure your guidelines include enough time for school work, positive social activities, and family time.

Make your child face consequences when he or she makes mistakes with peers. If your son has stayed out past curfew while with peers, limit his contact at the next opportunity. Then, give him another chance after he has paid his dues by coming home early. If your daughter has been involved in online chatting or phone conversations past your limits, cut off the computer or the phone for a day or two. In other words, set rules and enforce them with restrictions that are reasonable.