



Brain Wise Parenting

Westbrook Youth and Family Services, Inc.

Macdara MacColl, LMFT

macdara@wyfs.org

860-399-9239 * www.wyfs.org

10 Brain-Wise Parenting Tips

1. **Stay calm.**

No good parenting decision is made when you're panicked. And remember, whatever the crisis you're facing right now, most likely your child will survive and be okay. If you stay calm in the face of life's challenges, your child will learn from your example. A calm mind is a wise mind.

2. **SH*T Happens**

Remember, your middle schooler is quite often **S**tressed, **H**ungry or **T**ired. So, if your little love is acting like a royal pain, remind yourself that SH*T happens and start by checking if he's stressed, hungry or tired. Middle schoolers need a lot of sleep for healthy brain development, and they need healthful food, also. Finally, help your child develop stress-management techniques like deep breathing, listening to music, and journaling. Exercise is one of the best stress-relievers, so get them moving.

3. **Teach them your family values.**

Now that your child is in middle school, parenting shifts from controlling behavior to teaching values, judgment, and flexible problem solving. Explain your decision-making. Connect choices to family values. Are you a family that values hard work? Or community involvement? Fun? Humor? Sports? Thrift? Whatever it is, talk frequently about what it means to be a part of your family and the values you use in making decisions. From a cognitive standpoint, this is called "meaning making." We all "make meaning" out of the events of our lives. Our happiness often depends less on what happens to us than on the stories we tell ourselves about our lives. So teach your children to tell a story rooted in your family's values.

4. **Get the brain's reward system working for you.**

The limbic system is very powerful, and the prefrontal cortex is easily overwhelmed. The limbic system loves dopamine--a neurotransmitter involved in reward (the good feelings we get when we eat chocolate or win a game). Your middle schooler loves a good dopamine hit, and she gets it when she achieves a new level in Candy Crush or when she gets 1,000 likes for her Instagram picture. Good news--she also gets a dopamine hit when you praise her. So use her reward system to your advantage by praising her whenever she does something good--even if it's something you think she ought to do, like finishing her homework on time or hanging up her coat. Praise can be as simple as "thanks" or "I really appreciate all you

do.”

5. More preparing, less protecting.

Don't solve their problems for them. Help them figure out how to solve their own problems. Start by asking: “Do you need help with that?” “What have you tried?” Help them break down the issue, identify options, and make choices. Of course, you'll still need to impose some protection-based rules concerning technology, drugs, alcohol, social media, etc. Flexible problem-solving is the hallmark of a mature brain.

6. Limit...Monitor...Discuss

Technology, screens, social media--it's a big part of our children's lives. You should be using all the tools in your parenting toolkit to ensure your kids use technology within reasonable limits. Social media and virtual games hook us by triggering the pleasure centers of the brain. Plus, our prefrontal cortex loves novelty so is easily distracted by the latest Instagram picture or Facebook update. It's very easy for any of us to form a compulsive relationship with our smart phone or iPad. There's nothing inherently wrong with technology--and a lot that's very good about it--but we need to teach our kids (and ourselves) to use technology appropriately and within limits. Resisting the urge to check Facebook builds distress tolerance and delayed gratification skills--two cognitive tasks key to long-term success and mental fitness.

7. Make 'em work

If your middle schooler isn't doing chores-- start. No parent with a middle schooler in the house ought to be washing dinner dishes--that's what kids are for. They can make their own breakfast and pack their own lunch, too (as long as you can make sure they're eating healthful foods). They can do laundry--yes they can. Doing regular chores gives kids a sense of agency and accomplishment and teaches them to plan and manage time.

8. Parent down the middle: Acceptance *and* Expectations

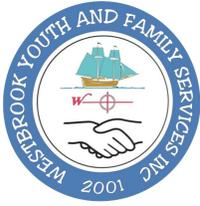
Good parenting is all about finding the balance between loving your child completely just as he is and expecting him to strive and improve. Kids need both consistent loving affirmation AND appropriately high expectations. This helps them find the optimal zone of mental functioning, where they feel both safe and challenged.

9. Have fun

Enjoy your kids. Sing in the car. Make goofy videos. Tickle them. Middle schoolers still know how to play--so play! Playing reduces stress, increasing feelings of well-being, and helps the brain practice important skills, like turn-taking, judgment, and perspective-taking. Playing also increases a family's sense of bonding and connection. Playing is a great way to instill family values.

10. It's Never Too Late

I hear this all the time. A parent says, “It's too late to limit cell phone use.” Or “It's too late to start chores in my house.” It's never too late. Start small and introduce change incrementally. But I promise you, it's never too late.



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What Parents Say...And the Surprising Responses of a Brain-Wise Therapist

Parent: She lied right to my face!

Mac: That's good! First -- everyone lies. Second -- lying shows that your child knows she did wrong and is afraid to disappoint or upset you. It's far worse to have a child who stares you right in the eyes and says, "Yeah, I broke that rule. What are you going to do about it?" Third -- lying is a complex cognitive task. Lying takes smarts. As parents, we should (usually) focus on what the child lied about (e.g., using her mobile phone before homework was done), rather than the lie itself.

Parent: He does his chores sometimes without me telling him, but then I come home and he hasn't taken the trash cans in. I shouldn't have to remind him!

Mac: Wrong! Raising kids is like training dogs--teach and repeat. And just like with dogs, praise gets more results than punishment. So praise praise praise ("Good doggy, dog!!") Remembering to do unpleasant tasks takes a lot of cognitive energy. When we're tired or stressed, our brains don't work as well--we forget stuff. So when he says, "I forgot," he's probably telling the truth. Also, young brains have a much harder time remembering multiple tasks at once. If you've told him, "Unpack your bag, do your homework, take out the trash, then feed the dog," he's forgotten half the list before you finish. Help your middle-schooler write "to do" lists or use reminder apps. Give instructions in manageable chunks and remind frequently. And praise 10 times for every 1 criticism.

Parent: She's so lazy. She just wants everything without working for it.

Mac: Me too! We all wish we could get what we wanted without working for it. Our brains are built to be lazy--we look for shortcuts. It takes training to learn we have to work for what we want. Long-term planning and delaying gratification are complicated, difficult cognitive tasks that require a lot of energy and practice. They also require a fully developed prefrontal cortex, which your middle schooler doesn't have. Don't expect your child to work hard until you've trained her to do that. And even if you do train her, don't expect her to like it.

Griping about hard work is part of the human condition. Remember: If your child gripes and whines, you're probably doing something right (as long as you don't give in).

Parent: She doesn't understand my perspective.

Mac: Of course she doesn't! Why would she? Understanding another's perspective is one of the most complicated cognitive tasks there is. It requires coordination of various brain regions involved in perception, emotional processing, social cueing, predicting the future, etc. It's important your child hears your reasoning and values, but at this point don't expect her always to "get it" from your perspective.

Parent: She's so mean to me. She hurts my feelings all the time.

Mac: This is one of the hardest parts of parenting. We love our children so dearly, and they can seem so cruel. But remember: Your child is probably pretty terrible at separating feelings (limbic system) from thoughts (prefrontal cortex). She's unskilled at examining her own internal experience ("meta-cognition") and expressing her emotions appropriately (integration of limbic and prefrontal cortex). So...when she says "I hate you!" she's really saying: "I'm angry with you for not doing what I want" or "I'm hurt because I feel you don't approve of who I am" or "I'm frustrated because I want to be an independent person and you're imposing your will." Try not to let "I hate you" hurt your feelings. Just take a deep breath, stay calm, and keep parenting. You're doing great.