

# 16 Tips for Drama-Free Parenting

by [Laura Markham, PhD](#) [Dr. Neala Peake, selected from AllThingsHealing.com](#) September 6, 2013

Parents often ask me how to get along with their suddenly volatile preteen daughter. It's a shock when your previously sweet little girl starts throwing tantrums again. Twelve year old girls can be moody, overdramatic, self-centered, focused almost solely on friends, close-mouthed, surly, back-talking and condescending to parents. They can, of course, also be mature, affectionate and delightful, but at their worst they're a cross between the most challenging aspects of toddlers and teens.

The bad news is that your tween's developing body is flooded by hormones; her need to discover herself and her place in the world takes priority over the other things she values (like her family and schoolwork), and she probably can't acknowledge how much she still loves and needs you, because she's working hard to feel "grown up" and independent. The good news is that if you can accept this new situation and adjust your parenting accordingly, the tween years are the perfect time to solidify your relationship, before she heads into the teen years.

## Tips to make parenting your tween girl less dramatic, and more delightful:

**1. Be willing to change.** You can't parent the way you did when she was little; it just isn't appropriate or effective. If she gets testy, that's a signal that you need to adjust your parenting style.

**2. Focus on the relationship, not on discipline.** You'll get no respect if she doesn't feel connected to you. Fight like the dickens to stay close to your daughter. Do not let her push you away. She still needs you, she just can't acknowledge it. Find every opportunity to connect. Hug her hello every morning, and when you see her again later in the day. Hug her goodbye when she leaves for school. She may not "need" tucking in at night, but that shouldn't stop you from lying down next to her to discuss her day and having a few minutes of quiet connection. I find that time just before bed to be the time my daughter is least distracted by other things, and most willing to open her heart to me.

**3. It's appropriate for your tween to want more independence.** If you insist on controlling all her choices, you're inviting rebellion, or worse. (I've known young people who spent their entire lives unable to assert their own wishes against their parents. In the worst cases the only escape seemed to them to be suicide.) If you can find appropriate ways to give your daughter independence, she won't have to rebel against you to start standing on her own two feet. Of course she'll make mistakes. That's how humans learn. Of course, she isn't ready to make all her decisions. You're still the parent. Deciding how much to weigh in is the hardest part of this parenting dance.

**4. Schedule quality time.** Create regular times, at least once a week, when you go together for brunch or a manicure or a walk, and make the most of those opportunities to connect. For ideas on conversations to have with her, check out [100 Conversation Starters for Conversations with Your Child](#). But you don't have to always have deep conversations. Just appreciate and enjoy her. And listen. Remember, the more you give her advice, the more she feels like you don't have confidence in her ability to figure things out for herself. Instead, seek to enjoy her, understand her, and connect.

**5. Cultivate empathy for your daughter.** As you listen to her, remind yourself that the upset of the moment may not seem like a big deal to you, but to her it feels like the end of the world. Having your body start changing so dramatically is worrisome at best and painful at worst, as in growing pains and menstrual cramps. That means that when she over-dramatizes, you offer empathy. Her stubbed toe may not have warranted all that fuss, but something does hurt and she does want you to kiss it and make it better, even if she isn't exactly sure what's bothering her and how to put it into words.

**6. Be aware that tween girls usually harbor great anxiety about adolescence.** One study found that tween boys looked forward to adolescence and the strength, power, independence and prestige they would develop. Tween girls, on the other hand, dreaded adolescence, fearing menstruation, their new vulnerability to men, and the pressure to be sexy and attractive. Most girls don't know how to put these anxieties into words, but they feel them, even as they beg to wear skimpy outfits so they'll be "cool." Your daughter may want to be a hottie, but inside she knows full well that she isn't ready for the attention that will bring.

**7. Be sure your daughter is getting nine hours of [sleep](#) each night**, as an absolute minimum. Most tweens begin to find it harder to fall asleep at night. When kids stay up late, their stress hormones like cortisol kick in, which makes it harder to fall asleep. The problem is that cortisol stays in the system and makes them edgy the next day; it also contributes to depression, anxiety, and weight gain. The famous moodiness of teenagers is partly attributable to late bedtimes, which have become standard practice in our culture. Just because your toddler gains the ability to keep himself awake doesn't mean you'd let him stay up half the night. Just because your tween and teen gain the ability to keep themselves up doesn't mean it isn't bad for

them. Introduce your tween to relaxation exercises if she's having a hard time falling asleep, they'll come in handy for the rest of her life. But insist on a reasonable bedtime.

**8. Limit computer use.** As tween girls begin to lose interest in pretend play and the other games that occupied their earlier years, many of them begin to spend more time on the computer, and it isn't unusual for them to fall into the grip of a computer addiction. You probably know to limit computer chatting to friends, and to the hours after homework is completed.

The lure of social media sites can be strong, especially if other kids are on them. Facebook has a rule that users must be 13 so getting a Facebook account when you're under 13 requires lying, which is enough reason for parents to nix it. (This is one of the few times the culture will support you in your parenting, so take advantage of it.) It's a good idea to familiarize yourself with the tech culture of your child and her friends; you might want to start with [Vanessa van Petten's website](#), where you can get her ebook "Dirt-E Secrets of an Internet Kid."

You should also know that computer game manufacturers spare no expense and use very sophisticated testing to insure that their games are physically addictive, which means that your daughter's body is bathed in adrenalin and other neurotransmitters as soon as she even thinks about playing her games. Computer games actually change our brain chemistry while we're playing them, and we don't know how long the effects last afterwards. Kids do need our help to manage this addiction.

**9. Nurture your daughter's passions.** Anything she really cares about and can throw herself into is protective, a place to feel competent, a place to push herself, a place to lose herself when the arrows of outrageous fortune pierce too deeply. Does she like to dance? Write? Draw? Do whatever it takes to encourage her. It's critical that this be something she is drawn to, of course, not something her parents are pushing.

**10. Don't let your daughter turn into a couch potato.** Regular [exercise](#) has tremendous benefits, from getting the metabolism moving to balancing raging hormones and helping her fall asleep easily at night. Make a habit of physical activity every day, whether a bike ride, soccer game, family hike or time on the treadmill. But be warned: You'll probably have to join in. Instead of resenting that, see it as a way to stay connected.

**11. Talk about relationships and sex.** Your daughter is hungry for information about love and sex. Talking about it won't make her rush out and do it. In fact, the opposite is true. Kids who don't have strong connections with their parents are the ones looking for love in all the wrong places. You don't want your kid to be the one in the closet with the boy at the party, the one the other kids talk about for months afterwards. The best way to prevent that is for her to understand that these scenarios happen, so she can walk out of any drama that's too much for her to handle.

**12. Don't take anything she says or does personally.** Tween and teen girls are famous for feeling like their parents "Just don't understand!" Try not to feel hurt by that. In fact, try not to feel hurt by anything she does or says. Most of it is not about you at all, but about her tumultuous hormones and emotions, her huge fears and insecurities, her urgent need to shape an identity as a separate, independent person. So just breathe through any "tantrums" and stay calm. The minute you get triggered, you're pushing her away.

**13. Insist on civility,** but do it from as calm a place as you can muster and don't overreact when your child raises her voice to you in the middle of hysterics over something. She will be deeply grateful, even if she can't acknowledge it at the moment. I'm not for a minute suggesting that you let your child treat you disrespectfully. I'm suggesting you act out of love and connect with empathy, rather than anger, as you set limits. If you're too angry to get in touch with your love, always wait until you can do so before you set limits. That means you keep your own voice calm and warm, even when she doesn't. It means that when she back-talks, you politely remind her "We don't talk to each other that way in this house," but then be sure to add "You must be so upset to talk to me that way. What's going on, Sweetie?" Remember, if you don't model self control, you can't expect it from her, and what's worse, you'll lose her respect.

**14. Remember that kids this age have strong feelings that they need help to handle.** If you can stay calm and listen for what's going on underneath her upset, you can use it as an opportunity to get closer. You could respond to her raising her voice at you by angrily insisting on respect, but you would drive your daughter away. Not knowing what to do with their tumultuous feelings, tweens and teens often act out towards the people they feel safest with: their parents. If we get distracted by their disrespect, or react angrily, we miss the real message. If we can instead empathize, look for the upset under the disrespect, and remind them of who they really are ("You don't usually act unkindly"), we create an opening to help them manage their feelings.

**15. Don't stop being physically close.** Your preteen daughter's body is growing into womanhood, but she is still your little girl, and she still needs your physical closeness. If you find yourself uncomfortable about holding her, observe your own anxiety and find a safe place to talk about it and work it out. But don't withhold from your daughter the touch all humans need. You don't want her looking for love in all the wrong places.

**16. Course correct. No one parents perfectly.** I found that about once a week I said exactly the wrong thing to my 12 year old, and whatever upset she was already in erupted in my face. But since I was committed to calming, rather than escalating the situation, I was able to use those mistakes and misunderstandings as opportunities to get closer. By 14, she was calmer than I am, and a delight to parent.

We have to remember that it's like putting on our own oxygen mask first. We have to regulate our own emotions, because they don't have the maturity to do it. They rely on us to act like grownups and model emotional self-management. If, instead, we walk away angry, our daughters feel wounded, misunderstood, alienated. They attack us, or build up resentment and distrust. A rift appears in the relationship, and if we don't respond quickly, it widens. But if, instead, we can back up, breathe, apologize, pay attention, and reconnect, we build bridges. The inevitable ruptures of daily life become opportunities to teach them so many lessons: how to process their emotions, how to repair an emotional rift, how to problem solve, that they can trust us. Most importantly, we end the interaction with a stronger relationship.

Parenting is a lot of emotional work, and never more so than with tweens and teens. It may seem unfair that you have to do most of the work in your relationship with your daughter, but that's the way parenting is. Our daughters may look like young women, but they've got a lot of growing up to do emotionally. It's our job — and our privilege — to support them in that process.

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