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# The Girly Guide

## Surviving Your Female Tween

By Kendeyl Johansen

"If I ask my 11-year-old daughter, MaKenzie, if she wants to go to a movie or out for pizza on the weekend she'll want to go to the mall," says Janie Sutton of Las Vegas, Nev.

According to Sutton, MaKenzie is a master of the third alternative: If given two choices, her daughter always comes up with a third. "It makes me crazy sometimes!" says Sutton.

Testing limits and trying to get "their way" are common practices for female preteens. But with a little understanding and patience, it's possible to embrace this and other tween behaviors.

"Preteens are reaching for independence, and girls especially are difficult for parents to raise due to the way the media presents clothes, makeup and body shapes," says Bonnie Harris, M.S. Ed., author of [When Your Kids Push Your Buttons: And What You Can Do About It](#) (Warner Books, April 2003). "When we see our daughters being influenced by the media or other outside influences, it really pushes buttons – we're afraid of what's ahead for them and for us."

### Increase the Peace

So how can parents diffuse their buttons and make life with a female tween easier? Harris recommends letting your daughter make more decisions and increasing her freedom as she grows. Just the thought of this frightens some parents, but preteens grow and gain self-confidence as they make decisions and solve problems.

Harris encourages parents to control their buttons (fears, judgments and criticisms) by uncovering why a behavior is so upsetting and then diffusing the button. For example, Anita Willoughby of Park City, Utah, made her tween daughter, Laurel, change out of a mini-skirt, but later learned her daughter had taken the skirt to school in her purse so she could change.

"I was livid at first, but then I realized it wasn't the skirt that was making me so upset," says Willoughby. "I was worried about the image it was giving off and what the boys would think about my daughter."



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She viewed things from Laurel's point of view and realized her daughter wasn't wearing the skirt to make her mad – she was just trying to look fashionable. And Laurel, normally open and talkative, was so afraid of her mom's reaction she'd resorted to sneakiness.

Willoughby took a deep breath and told Laurel about her fears. "Laurel knew I disliked the skirt but not why," she says. "We discussed my concerns and then talked for a long time about Laurel's image and how she wants to come across to others. It turned out

her daughter felt awful about sneaking around, and the Willoughbys promised to talk out future issues. Also, Laurel decided not to wear the skirt to school, and she started asking for her mother's opinion more often.

### Just Say So

Besides diffusing buttons, parents can increase family harmony by talking with tweens, keeping involved in their lives and getting to know their friends. Adults can build bridges instead of walls by looking at magazines with a fashion-conscious tween and discussing thoughts about body types and modesty or watching a movie together and later talking about the actor's relationships and actions.

"Use everyday life to let your daughter know your values without imposing your values on her," says Harris. "Find out what she thinks about things and what is especially important to her. And getting to know what your daughter's friends think and enjoy can provide additional opportunities for discussion."

### Prevent Peer Pressure

To help your tween withstand peer pressure teach her about self-respect, respect for others and high standards. "When a person believes in herself she is more likely to make the 'right' decisions in difficult moments," says Mike Domitrz, author of [May I Kiss You?](#) (Awareness Publications, March 2003) and creator of Can I Kiss You?, an interactive program for schools and campuses. "Students with low self-esteem are more likely to lower their standards to please others – a very dangerous and unhealthy behavior."

Many tween girls are already having romantic thoughts about boys, whether parents are ready for this or not. Domitrz stresses girls need to learn early to "expect to be respected" and not to tolerate any forms of disrespect.

Watching parents model healthy behavior toward others creates the foundation for healthy relationships in a preteen's future. And, of course, discussing peer pressure issues with your preteen will help your child avoid and work through them.

Kathy Anderson of Taos, N.M., and her 10-year-old daughter, Rachel, have frequent conversations about peer pressure. Recently a group of Rachel's friends became "boy-crazy," spending recesses chasing boys and talking about them. Rachel isn't interested in romance yet, and when she didn't join in with the girls, they snubbed her. "Rachel felt hurt, but we talked about friendship and what she wants in a friend," says Anderson. "The next day Rachel decided to build friendships with kids in her class that share her interests in soccer and dance."

### Let Small Stuff Slide

Anderson and her daughter love to laugh at jokes and shop together, and Rachel has a naturally sunny disposition. But like many female tweens, Rachel is sometimes moody and emotional. "When Rachel is pouting or moody it works best for me to just ignore the behavior," says Anderson. "Eventually, when she wants positive attention she cheers up."

Sutton also faces moody behavior from MaKenzie. "I tell her she can be as grumpy and pouty as she wants as long as it's in her room," says Sutton. MaKenzie is social and doesn't like to be alone for long, so her bedroom stays are short.



### Little Is Big

Don't underestimate what little kindnesses mean to your tween. "Special days and outings are important to my daughter and me, but I try to show her love every day with little things, like helping French-braid her hair or giving her my full attention while she tells me about her day at school," says Sutton.

Last week MaKenzie had a rough day with a clique at school excluding her. "I made her favorite dinner: spaghetti and meatballs, cheesy garlic bread and brownies," says Sutton. "She gave me a big smile and said, 'Thanks Mom. I needed that!' Life with a preteen is up and down, but after that dinner I felt appreciated and MaKenzie felt loved. Moments like these make life great."

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