

Middle Years

Working Together for School Success



Short Stops

Family mood lifter

Want to learn about your tween's day while putting a smile on everyone's face? During dinner, pose upbeat questions like "What made you happy today?" or "What are you looking forward to this week?" *Idea:* Ask your child to come up with tomorrow's questions.

Clean = safer and healthier

Remind your middle schooler that she has a key role to play in keeping her environment (and herself) as clean as possible. That means washing her hands frequently—especially now. She should also toss trash in bins and wipe up anything she spills so she doesn't make extra work for busy parents or school custodians.

Rice and ratios

The kitchen is a great place for your tween to brush up on ratios and percentages. For example, while cooking rice, ask him what the ratio is of dry rice to liquid (1:2, or 1 cup uncooked rice to 2 cups water). Or suggest that he use percentages to mix up his perfect batch of trail mix. Maybe he'll use 50 percent nuts, 30 percent dried fruit, 10 percent seeds, and 10 percent chocolate chips.

Worth quoting

"No matter what people tell you, words and ideas can change the world." *Robin Williams*

Just for fun

Q: How many marbles can you put in an empty jar?

A: One. After that, the jar isn't empty anymore.



Back-to-school questions, answered

The start of a new school year is an exciting time. But the disruptions this year may have left you wondering how to help your tween do her best. Here are answers to questions from parents like you.

Q: My tween is struggling to get back into learning mode this school year. What can I do?

A: Children—and adults—face many distractions in the era of COVID-19. Help your child get on track by showing enthusiasm for what he is learning, whether it's in school or online. You might watch a movie that's set in an era he's studying in history or ask him to explain an engineering project he's working on.



Q: With all the COVID-19 news, my daughter is a little nervous about school. What should I say?

A: Getting the facts may help your child feel better. Ask what, specifically, she's concerned about. If she has a question you can't answer, look it up together. Explain that by following rules—even hard ones for middle graders like social distancing from friends—she reduces her risk of getting sick or spreading germs to you, her grandparents, and others.



Q: My child is concerned that she won't remember what she learned last year. How can I help?

A: Explain to your tween that her classmates are in the same situation. Teachers know that students may need to review last year's work, such as math formulas or Spanish vocabulary, before moving on to new material. If your child doesn't understand something, encourage her to speak up. Her teacher will understand—and provide support.

Q: When my tween does schoolwork online, how do I know he's doing what he's supposed to do?

A: Have your tween close any apps or tabs not related to his work. That will help him stay focused. Also, look over completed online work just as you might look at paper-and-pencil assignments and projects. You may be able to monitor grades online and see whether he has any missing work. And you can always contact teachers if you have questions about your child's progress. 🍌



Organized from the start

In middle school, staying organized is one of the most important steps to success. Help your child stay on top of his schoolwork with these strategies.

Use a planner. Make sure your tween has a planner—and takes advantage of it. He should write in assignment deadlines, study sessions, and test dates. Then he could estimate and enter the time he'll spend on each task. That will help him plan work sessions.



File everything. Setting up and using a filing system means your tween will always find what he needs. He might choose a different-color folder for each class. Or he could have one folder for notes and assignments and another for completed work. *Tip:* Suggest that he turn a shower caddy into a portable school-supply station.

Invest 10 minutes each day.

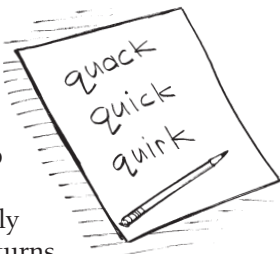
Encourage your child to take five minutes before school to consult his planner and check that he has what he needs for that day. After school, he can spend five minutes filing papers and throwing away anything he doesn't need. 🍷

Word games

Word games are not only fun, they help build vocabulary and spelling skills. Here are two to try.

Word morph

Have your youngster write a five- or six-letter word at the top of a sheet of paper. Let family members take turns making a new word by changing one letter in the last word written. *Example:* quack, quick, quirk. When you can't make any more words, pick a new word and play again.



Word staircase

Each player writes the numbers 4 to 12 down the left side of her paper. One person picks a two-letter combination that often begins words (*en, cr, ph*) and sets a timer for five minutes. Next to each number, write a word with that many letters and beginning with the letters chosen. *Example:* For *en*, put *envy* beside 4 and *enact* by 5. To win, come up with the most words that no one else used. 🍷



Q & A

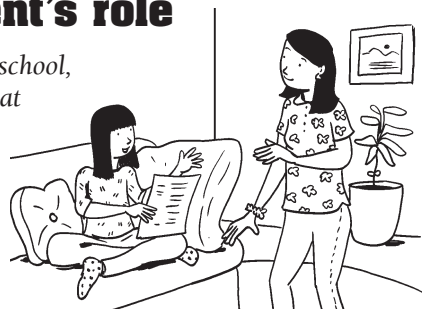
Middle school: A parent's role

Q When my daughter was in elementary school, I was very active in her school life. Now that she's older, should I still be so involved?

A Research shows that students of all ages do better when their parents are involved. But that involvement may look a little different now that your daughter is in middle school.

For instance, she's expected to take more responsibility for her learning. So you might offer to brainstorm ideas for a project, but let her choose the topic. Or if she's not sure how to approach an assignment, encourage her to ask her teacher for help rather than having you reach out for her.

On the other hand, some things will look the same. Attend back-to-school night and parent-teacher conferences, just as you did when she was in elementary school. Introduce yourself to your child's teachers, and ask how they prefer to be contacted. Finally, visit the school website and sign up to receive emails—then be sure to check the site and your inbox regularly for news. 🍷



Parent to Parent

Helping tweens bounce back

My son Matthew can be really hard on himself. When he was eliminated early during last year's spelling bee, he called himself a "failure" and said he wouldn't enter this year.

His English teacher told Matthew she hoped he'd try again. In fact, she encouraged him to look at the setback as an opportunity to build "resilience" (the ability to bounce back from tough situations).

Following the teacher's lead, I asked Matthew to tell me what

he'd learned from the spelling bee. He said he had trouble with the words that came from French. Then he said he guessed he could spend more time studying those words for this year's bee.

To try to build up his resilience, I'm encouraging Matthew to take chances with other things that interest him. For instance, he recently took up baking.

When he frosted his first cake before it cooled and the icing melted down the sides, he learned that slipups aren't the end of the world. That messy cake still tasted great! 🍷



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www.rfeonline.com
ISSN 1540-5540

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Short Stops

Boost self-esteem

Your middle schooler's friends can have a big impact on how she feels about herself. If her self-confidence is lagging, ask, "Which friends make you feel good?" and "Do any friends put you down?" Suggest that she hang on to friends in the first category—and rethink how much time she spends with those in the second.

DID YOU KNOW?

Working in front of a computer screen can cause eye strain. To avoid headaches, blurred vision, and watery eyes, your child should use the 20-20-20 rule. For every 20 minutes of screen time, look up at something 20 feet away for 20 seconds.

Energy investigator

Learning about your family's energy use introduces your tween to science concepts—and gives him a chance to help take care of the planet. Have him search online for top energy-wasters and then find opportunities to correct them at home, like unplugging a fully charged phone or a printer that's in "sleep" mode.

Worth quoting

"Life is like a trumpet. If you don't put anything into it, you don't get anything out of it." W. C. Handy

Just for fun

Q: What do you get when you cross a stream and a brook?

A: Wet feet!



Limits for middle schoolers

Your tween might not admit it now that he's getting older, but boundaries help him feel safe and secure. Rules also teach him to make positive choices as he grows up. Consider these tips for setting limits.

Prioritize rules

Having too many rules can be confusing for everyone. Try to narrow them to key categories like health and safety (no drugs and alcohol, limit screen time), school (complete homework on time, keep grades up), and family life (do chores, be respectful).

Be clear and reasonable

State each rule simply but clearly, and try to phrase it in a positive way. *Example:* "Sign off from social media and put away your phone 1 hour before bed" vs. "Don't chat with friends at night." Listen to your tween's input ("My friends text late!"). Then explain your reasoning.



("Screen time can interfere with sleep, and you need sleep to stay healthy and do well in school.")

Remain consistent

Stand firm in enforcing rules—letting something slide teaches your child that the rules don't really matter. Also, assign a consequence that's directly linked to each rule. Have him make and hang up a two-column list labeled "Rules" ("I agree to finish homework before playing video games") and "Consequences" ("If not, I understand that I can't play video games for one day").

Stay on top of projects

A long-term project will seem more doable if your tween thinks of it as a series of smaller assignments. Recommend this strategy.

■ **Break it into chunks.** Your child can start by listing everything she needs to do. For a paper analyzing a famous speech, steps might begin with: "1. Read the speech," and "2. Research the speaker's life." Seeing that each step is something she can handle will give her the motivation to begin.

■ **Assign a deadline to each chunk.** Your middle grader could work backward to make a schedule for completing her project. On her calendar, she should write in the project's due date, then add her own due date for each step.



Find meaning in books

Thinking “outside the book” often leads to deeper understanding when your child reads novels for school. Share these activities.

Pair it up. Encourage your middle schooler to find a poem or another book that’s related to what she’s reading. For a novel about the Dust Bowl, she might choose Langston Hughes’s poem, “Dust Bowl.” How does the poem affect her feelings about events in the book? Or she could read an ice-skater’s biography along with a novel about ice-skating.



What does knowing more about the world of ice-skating add to her understanding of the challenges the characters in the book faced?

Visualize it. Picturing people and places helps your middle grader comprehend books set in other times and lands. Suggest that she look up images online from the time period the book is set in. Ask her to imagine how people she reads about would

have dressed or what they might have eaten. Or perhaps she’ll learn more about a setting in her book by looking at images on [google.com/earth/](https://www.google.com/earth/). 👍

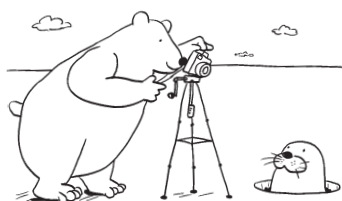


Take a picture!

Snapping photos is a popular pastime for tweens. With these ideas, your child will boost his creativity as he takes interesting shots.

Experiment with subjects

Encourage your middle grader to shoot extreme close-ups of objects, such as marbles in a jar or the inside of an orange. Then, he can share the photo with family members and challenge them to figure out what’s pictured. Or he might snap photos related to a theme, perhaps water or happiness, and put them in an album to keep on the coffee table.



Explore all the angles

Your tween could try shooting the same scene or object from various perspectives. Maybe he’ll lie under a tree and point his camera straight up to take a picture. Then he can stand up, step away from the tree, and get a photo at a different angle. 👍

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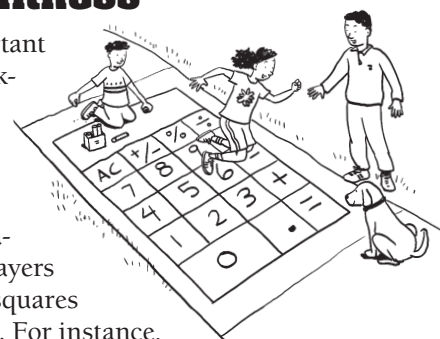
Parent to Parent

Fall for family fitness

I know exercise is important for my family’s health, but we weren’t making time for it. So now each week, we appoint an “activity director” who plans an active game to play.

My seventh-grader, Mariah, invented Calculator Hopscotch. She drew a calculator on the driveway, and on each turn, players toss a rock onto a number and hop onto squares to create equations equaling that number. For instance, when Mariah’s rock landed on 7, she solved $56 \div 8 = 7$ by hopping on 5, 6, \div , 8, =, and 7. Since her equation was correct, she scored 7 points. High score won the game.

My sixth-grader, Rafael, made up a nature scavenger hunt. He listed things to find, like an acorn or something blue, and we raced to find them. We’re having so much fun playing outside that we don’t even feel like we’re exercising! 👍



Q & A

Academic honesty—at home

Q How can I make sure my son doesn’t cheat when he works online at home?

A It can be tempting for tweens to copy and paste information from the internet or chat answers to friends. Or they may not even realize they’re cheating. Explain to your child that cheating is dishonest, can cause him to get a zero on his work—and will prevent him from learning.

Instead of copying and pasting, encourage him to read his

source material, close that window, and type the information in his own words. Point out that it’s not enough to rearrange words and sentences. He needs original explanations and examples, and he needs to cite the source. If he’s taking a test or quiz at home, make sure he turns off chat and email notifications. He won’t be distracted by pings or feel pressured to share answers.

Finally, praise hard work rather than focusing on grades—you’ll teach him to value both effort and honesty. 👍



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Attendance matters

Missing even a few classes — whether they're in person or online—can have a snow-ball effect. Not only does being absent make it hard for your child to keep up, but chronic absenteeism is linked with a higher dropout rate. Make sure your middle grader knows you expect him to be in every class every day, unless he's sick or there's a family emergency.

Digital manners

Before your tween sends a text, post, or email, suggest that she ask herself, "Is this nice? Would I say it in person?" If the answer to either question is no, it's a good idea to reword. *Tip:* If she feels the need to type a disclaimer like "No offense, but ..." she probably shouldn't hit "send."

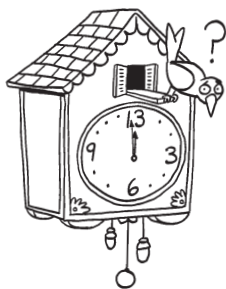
When parents disagree

Children who hear their parents arguing can feel stressed and insecure. Try to avoid topics that cause tension when your middle schooler is within earshot. If he does overhear an argument, offer reassurance: "We were upset, but we worked it out. And we still love each other and you."

Worth quoting

"Go confidently in the direction of your dreams!" *Henry David Thoreau*

Just for fun



Q: What time is it when the clock strikes 13?

A: Time to get a new clock.

Fine-tune your study routine

A good study routine helps your middle schooler manage her workload and make the best use of her time. Use these ideas to help her develop one that works for her.

Set the scene

For one week, challenge your tween to do "quality checks" of her study sessions. She can write down distractions (TV, text messages), note how she feels when she loses focus (fidgety, hungry), and pinpoint time wasters (searching for school supplies, choosing a snack). Together, brainstorm solutions. Maybe she can silence electronics, set a timer to take breaks, and gather supplies and snacks before she starts working.



algebra practice problems (30 minutes)" instead of "Study for math test."

Personalize the approach

The "right" way to study is different for every student. Suggest that your child experiment with study methods to find her favorites. She might notice whether she stays on task better when she studies alone or if she learns more in a study group. Or maybe she'll try reading notes silently and out loud. She may realize that silent reading is faster but that she remembers more when she sees *and* hears the material. 🍷

Always have a plan

Your middle grader could find a regular time to study each day that fits with mealtimes and other activities. It might be at 5 p.m. most days and 7 p.m. on Wednesdays when your family eats dinner early. Then, she can start each session by listing specific tasks and how long she expects them to take. "Do 12

On common ground

As your child gets older, you can stay close by discovering routines and activities to share. Here's how:

- Choose things you do regularly, like eating and exercising, and try to do them with your tween. For instance, have breakfast together before he leaves for school. Or if he's doing online school, aim to sync your lunch breaks. Invite him to join you on your next run, or offer to shoot baskets with him.
- Look for common interests. Does your middle grader like music you enjoyed at his age? Play "Name That Tune" to see who can shout out titles and artists first. Or did he stream a TV series you loved when it originally aired? Make up trivia questions about the show, and try to stump each other. 🍷



Focus on mental health

Strong coping strategies can help your tween navigate difficult situations—including a pandemic. Share these techniques for boosting his mental health.

Let it out. If your middle grader feels anxious or sad, writing may make his feelings more manageable. Suggest that he keep a journal, write poetry or song lyrics, or jot concerns on slips of paper to drop in a “worry jar.” Also, talk to him regularly about his feelings, and



share your own thoughts. (“I miss working in the office with my colleagues, but it’s nice to work in comfy clothes.”)

Look for the good. When your tween is stressed, encourage him to close his eyes, take deep breaths, and visualize one positive thing that happened today. Maybe he got to video chat with a friend he hasn’t seen in a while. Thinking about good times can make worries seem less intense.

Find humor. Laughter is a proven mental health booster. Your middle schooler might decorate his bedroom wall with things that make him chuckle, such as comic strips or funny pictures. He could even draw his own comics or write silly captions for photos. Ask him to show you the jokes, and enjoy a good laugh together. 🤔

Parent-teacher conferences

There are many great reasons to take part in conferences with your middle grader’s teachers. Here are four.

1. You’ll help your child succeed.

Students do their best when parents and teachers work together. Making a personal connection sets the stage for a strong partnership.

2. You’ll get to share information.

Hearing about life at home gives the teacher insight into your tween. (“Lucy’s two younger siblings are also doing remote learning.”)



3. You’ll learn what’s expected.

Knowing what your middle schooler needs to master helps you support her. Ahead of time, ask if she has questions for her teachers.

4. You’ll send a good message. Taking time to attend conferences shows your tween that school is important to you. *Tip:* Share teachers’ nice comments with her. (“Mr. Walker said you make excellent points during class discussions.”) 🤔

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Parent to Parent

A STEM-powered race

My son Tony loves STEM club, and he asked if we could do STEM challenges at home. So we decided we’d hold a family competition to engineer the best balloon-powered car.

Tony used a paper cup for the body of his car, chopsticks for the axles, and wagon-wheel pasta noodles for the wheels. He poked a hole in the bottom of the cup and threaded an uninflated balloon through the hole. Then, he blew it up and let go—the car whizzed across the room as the air left the balloon.

I made my car out of an empty cream cheese tub, knitting needles, and thread spools. It didn’t go as far as any of my kids’ cars—but Tony helped me redesign it so it would go a lot farther.

Next, we’re going to see who can build the biggest house of cards that stands on its own. 🤔



Q&A Raise a lifelong learner

Q My daughter told me I’m lucky that I don’t have to do school-work or take tests anymore. How can I help her understand that learning is lifelong?

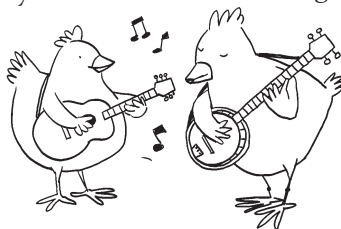
A Knowing that she’ll keep learning throughout life can motivate your daughter to do better in school.

Share with her what you learn each day. You might mention a new cash register system you’re being trained

on at work, an article you read about the Mars rover, or a podcast on food trends that you listened to in the car. Show enthusiasm for learning new things—it may rub off on your child!

Then, talk about how she’ll keep learning outside of class. If she wants to get a puppy, she’ll need to research training tips.

Or if she loves playing guitar, maybe she’ll teach herself to play other instruments like the ukulele and the banjo. 🤔



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The power of zero

Help your child understand the importance of turning in every assignment. Have her add up several of her grades ($97 + 89 + 93 = 279$) and divide by the number of grades to get her average ($279 \div 3 = 93$). Then, ask her to change the last grade to zero and average again—suddenly, the 93 becomes a 62.

Great advice!

Want to raise the odds that your middle schooler will actually follow your advice? Get his input. Instead of saying, “Setting your alarm 10 minutes earlier will keep you from scrambling to get ready every morning,” try, “I’ve been running late in the mornings, too. What ideas do you think could help us?”

DID YOU KNOW?

Just a few minutes of physical activity can immediately improve your middle grader’s concentration. Remind her to use her distance-learning or study breaks to move around. She could write quick ideas on slips of paper (“Dance to a song,” “Do 5 jumping jacks”) and pick one to do between classes or subjects.

Worth quoting

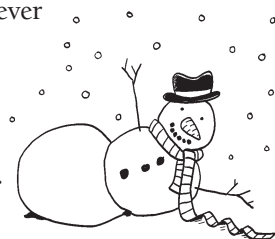
“The mind that opens to a new idea never returns to its original size.”

Albert Einstein

Just for fun

Q: What falls in winter but never gets hurt?

A: Snow!



Kindness makes a difference

Clue your middle schooler in on this formula for a happier, more successful life: When he is kind and sees kindness in others, he will feel better about himself and the world around him—and other people will view him more favorably, too. Try these ideas.

Be a detective

Challenge your tween to spot kind acts throughout the day and jot them down in a pocket notebook. He might notice someone stepping aside to let him pass on the sidewalk, for instance. How many kindnesses can he find in one day? Make it a point to call out his kind acts, too: “It was kind of you to offer your seat on the bus to that woman holding her baby.”

Watch for opportunities

Suggest that your middle grader think of safe ways to assist people who are struggling or lonely. Maybe he’ll make cards or bookmarks for nursing



home residents or have a virtual game night with younger cousins who miss seeing their friends.

Play bingo

Your child can create a bingo card to fill with kind acts (donate clothes you’ve outgrown, let someone go ahead of you in line, do a chore for a sibling). Make a copy for each family member, and cross off acts you complete. Who will get bingo (five in a row) first? Can everyone finish their cards? 🍷

Look on the bright side

Having a good attitude toward school can help your tween learn more. Here’s how to nurture positive thinking.

■ **Use upbeat language.** Encourage your child to reframe negative remarks. “We get too much homework in math” becomes “All this practice means I’ll remember the formulas.” Let her hear you talk up school, too. (“Your art teacher gives really interesting assignments!”)

■ **Act as a cheerleader.** Show your tween that you believe in her and expect her to do well. Regularly ask to see or hear work she’s proud of, such as a poem she wrote in English or a solo she’s working on in chorus. 🍷



Plan ahead for better essays

Like going for a hike, writing an essay requires advance planning. In both situations, your tween needs to know where she's headed and how she'll get there. Share these steps to map out a well-written paper.

1. Choose a destination. Suggest that your child list at least three ideas for her essay topic. Say she's asked to write a personal narrative about an obstacle she overcame. Possibilities might include moving to a new town or recovering from



a soccer injury. Then she can pick the one she believes will make the most compelling narrative.

2. Make a map. Your middle grader could draw a big soccer ball in the middle of her paper and write her essay title inside ("Getting Back in the Game"). Then, she can surround it with medium-sized balls for subtopics (her injury, physical therapy) and

add small balls with supporting details (recovery milestones, teammates' support). Now she can refer to her map as she writes her essay. 🍷



Screen addiction?

Q I think my son is addicted to screens. He only wants to play video games in his free time and can't seem to go a minute without checking his phone. What should I do?

A While "screen addiction" isn't an official diagnosis, excessive screen use can be connected to anxiety and depression.

Ask yourself whether your child's usage is so all-consuming that it's having a negative effect on him. Consult his pediatrician if you notice any of these red flags:



- He can't control his screen use or lies about it.
- He has lost interest in other activities.
- His screen time interferes with sleep, school, or relationships.
- Screens are his main source of happiness or comfort.

You can help your son cut back by setting limits for the whole family. That way, he's not watching others play on their phones when he can't use his. Finally, encourage him to fill downtime with screen-free activities he enjoys, perhaps running or drawing. 🍷

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Kitchen chemistry

Holiday baking is a science—literally! Talk about these physical and chemical reactions while making treats with your middle grader.

What happens when you melt butter?

When energy (heat) is added to a solid, like butter, it causes the atoms to speed up—and the butter becomes a liquid. This is an example of a physical reaction. Together, observe what happens when melted butter cools again. It turns back into a solid because the atoms slow down.

What makes cakes rise?

Have your tween mix 1 tsp. baking soda with 1 tbsp. vinegar. He'll see bubbles, signaling a chemical reaction. In a cake recipe, baking soda reacts with acidic ingredients like vinegar, lemon juice, or buttermilk to release carbon dioxide, and the expanding gases make the cake rise. 🍷



Parent to Parent

Peer pressure: Trust your instincts

My daughter Rosa went to the mall with friends when they were supposed to be at the park. Because she broke our pandemic-safety rule about no indoor socializing, I told her she had to stay home for two weeks.

When I asked Rosa why she went somewhere she wasn't supposed to, she said, "Because everyone else did." Then she admitted to feeling nervous and guilty inside the mall.

I encouraged her to think of feelings like those as "alarms"—when an alarm goes off, that's a sign to "wake up" and think for herself.

Next, we brainstormed responses she could have used like "My parents would ground me" or "My family is careful about indoor spaces."

My daughter wasn't happy to be grounded—but next time she's pressured to do something that sets off alarm bells, I hope she'll make a better choice. 🍷

