

The Middle School Student

ROOTS & WINGS

The In-Between-Ager

I see children as kites

I see children as kites.
You spend a lifetime trying to get them off the ground.
You run with them until you are both breathless.
They crash; they hit the rooftop,
you patch and comfort, adjust and they will fly.
Finally they are airborne.
They need more string; you keep letting it out.
But with each twist of the ball of twine,
there is a sadness that goes with joy.
The kite becomes more distant.
You know it won't be long before
that beautiful creature will snap the lifeline
that binds you together, and will soar
as it's meant to soar free and alone -
Only then will you know
you have done your job.



A Parent's Guide to Middle School Transition

"As we all worry that our child may not be ready for middle school, we need to remember the original intent of middle schools. Middle schools were designed to prepare students for high school, NOT to prepare 5th graders for 6th grade! Also, we need to know that our children are not just jettisoned into an educational environment left to flounder. Teachers, counselors and administrators are there to make sure every child feels safe and successful."

Kevin Gillespie, counselor,
Centennial Elementary School

We hear many things about the behavior of a pre-teen. Many parents are prepared to excuse the behavior of a teen by saying, "Oh, they're supposed to act that way," or "Oh, they're supposed to talk back to adults and misbehave," not unlike the behavior of a toddler going through the "terrible twos." Tell your children clearly what you want and why, and listen to their point of view. Boundaries work far better if they are made and agreed upon by everyone. **In short, expect it, but you don't have to accept it.** Included in this booklet are some tips for survival.

Staying the Course Academically

What you can do to help:

- Tell your adolescent that you expect him/her to complete all homework assignments without being reminded, to get to school on time every day, to make contributions in his/her classes and school activities, and to get the best grades he/she can.
- Praise your child often. Use words like "bright," "creative," "imaginative," "kind," and "hard-working," as opposed to "brilliant," "genius," "smartest," and "perfect."
- Ask open-ended questions about what's happening at school. Talk daily about what he/she is learning and doing in school.
- Ask often if there are messages from the school. Keep informed about your adolescent's grades and test results.
- Request periodic meetings with teachers, especially when you see your adolescent struggling.
- Attend parent meetings and volunteer at school. Don't be surprised if your adolescents feel embarrassed when you go to their school. Go anyway.
- Consistently acknowledge and reward your adolescent's efforts in school. Adolescents love monetary rewards, but also try a special trip together, a favorite dinner, or something unexpected that's valued by your child.
- Expect young people to do their best, but allow them room to make mistakes.

When children enter middle school, some parents stop being as actively involved, as if their help and support are no longer needed. Nothing could be further from the truth! Although your middle-schooler is becoming more independent and is increasingly involved in activities outside the family, you should and must remain the most influential person in his or her life.

Studies show that many children's grades drop during the first year of middle school. It's at this point that they sometimes become less interested in studying and less self-assured about their abilities (www.guilderlandschools.org/district/parent_corner). Research results are very clear: When parents are actively involved in their children's education, they do better in school (www.middleweb.com). Therefore, it is important that parents take the initiative to continue their involvement and collaboration in their children's school throughout the middle school experience. Through your involvement, you can do a lot to help your child believe in the value and importance of education, be enthusiastic about learning, and achieve academic success.



Dealing with emotions during adolescence

Diffusing Anger

Adolescents are experiencing a time of great hormonal and physical changes, and anger naturally comes as a part of the package. Anger is not a bad emotion; it's a normal one. Parents serve as role models of how to express anger appropriately.

When you're upset with your adolescent:

- Speak respectfully.
- Use "I" statements ("I feel upset when I have to wait because you haven't arrived at our agreed upon time").
- Practice active listening (nod, say yes when appropriate, don't interrupt).
- Match your body language with your words.
- Stick to the current issue and don't bring up past situations.



What you can do to help

- Remember, children learn to argue if they *practice* arguing or if arguing gets them what they want.
- Remain calm. When approached by an angry adolescent, if he/she is angry with another person, listen but do not try to solve the problem. If he/she is angry with you, say, "When you calm down and are ready to talk about this sensibly, I am ready to discuss it."
- Arguing about a task or behavior you want your adolescent to do will encourage him/her to rationalize and defend his behavior. Simply tell the young person what is to be done. If he/she does not comply, apply a consequence.
- If you try something and it works for a while and then the behavior returns, it is not working.
- Ignore talking back whenever you can. Tell the adolescent what the consequences of further talking back will be, and follow through with the consequences.
- Generally speaking, most parents talk too much when disciplining instead of focusing on trying to change behaviors. Taking action when a situation cannot be ignored means depriving the adolescent of some privilege.
- A statement like, "I agreed that this seems unfair to you. What do you think we can do about it?" shows understanding by you and promotes thinking by your child, rather than lashing out. The use of the word "we" signals to the child that you are going to help him/her find a solution.
- Be clear about what you expect from your adolescents with regard to school, friends, chores, obligations. Expect their best, but give them room to make mistakes.

Bullying

Bullying is not a normal part of growing up. Adolescents, as well as children and adults, must have empathy to understand the negative impact bullying has on others. During the adolescent years it is as important as ever to help your child understand how to be assertive and to stand up for him or herself.

- Bullying happens an average of every 7 minutes on school playgrounds.
- 60% of male bullies will have one conviction by age 24.
- 85% of a school's population is made up of bystanders.
- Bullying is one of the leading causes of suicide.
- More than 90% of victims' grades will drop.

What you can do to help

- Have a conversation with your child. Make sure your child knows that he or she can come to you about anything at anytime.
- Teach your adolescent resistance skills such as avoiding or ignoring bullies, using humor, walking confidently, and speaking assertively. Assure him/her that the bullying is not his/her fault.
- If you think your child is a bully, you need to get help right away from your child's school counselor, teacher, principal, or doctor.

Relational Aggression

"Emotional violence and bullying behaviors focused on damaging an individual's social connections within his or her peer group" (Crick, 2002).

- It is girls who primarily use this covert form of aggression in an attempt to control their social status among peers.
- What to look for: Exclusion, ignoring, spreading rumors, verbal insults, teasing, intimidation, eye rolling, taunting, and/or manipulative affection.

What you can do to help

- Model Appropriate Behavior
- Observe Adolescent Interactions
- Don't Ignore Behaviors
- Emphasize the Importance Reporting
- Listen Empathetically

Dealing with emotions during adolescence

Internet or cyber bullying

"Using the Internet or other mobile devices to send or post harmful or cruel text or images to bully others"
(Nancy Willard, Director, Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use).

What you can do to help

- Require your child to provide you with his or her online screen names and passwords in order to make sure he is using safe Internet practices.
- Keep up-to-date with the current trends in Internet hotspots for teens.
- Assess your child's knowledge, attitudes, and experiences concerning Internet bullying.
- Share information about cyber bullying with your child. Tell him/her:
 - Never to disclose personal contact information
 - Not to share anything online that he/she wouldn't want parents, teachers, or peers to read or see (pictures)

Depression

Depression isn't just having bad moods and occasional melancholy. Additionally, it is not just feeling down or sad. Depression is when a depressive state or mood lingers for a long time – a couple of weeks, months, or even longer – and limits an adolescent's ability to keep up with his/her daily activities and routines.

Depression can be frightening and frustrating for your adolescent, you, and your entire family. With the proper treatment and your help, though, your adolescent can start to feel better and go on to enjoy his/her teen and adult years.

What you can do to help

- Make sure your adolescent takes any prescribed medicines and encourage healthy eating too, as this may help improve his/her mood and outlook.
- Encourage physical activity.
- Provide unconditional support and acceptance.
- Do not confuse symptoms of depression with laziness.

Know the Warning Signs

- Frequent sadness and/or hopelessness
- Decreased interest in activities or an inability to enjoy previously favorite ones
- Persistent boredom and/or low energy
- Social isolation and/or poor communication
- Low self-esteem and guilt
- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure
- Increased irritability, anger or hostility
- Frequent complaints of physical illness, such as headaches and stomachaches
- Poor concentration
- Change in eating and/or sleeping patterns
- Frequent absences from school or poor performance in school
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Talk of or efforts to run away from home

Stress

Learning how to deal with stress is part of growing up, but your middle school student *will* need help.

What you can do to help

- Be available to talk.
- Encourage healthy escapes from the daily routine of school. Show your adolescent the benefits of doing something physical or creative when stressed.
- Promote laughter.
- Build your adolescent's confidence and self-esteem by remembering to praise him/her when he/she does something good.
- Teach your adolescent how to keep things in perspective.
- Model for your adolescent how to focus on the positive aspects of a situation.
- Be wary of negative roadblocks. Often students who do not learn to deal with stress appropriately turn to drugs and alcohol. Talk to your adolescent about saying "no" to drugs and alcohol and remember the warning signs.



Characteristics of Middle Schoolers' Healthy Lifestyle

Nutrition and a Healthy Lifestyle

Avoid conveying the idea that you think your child is fat.

- Children should be taught that the range of normal weight is fairly wide.

Build exercise into your child's schedule.

- 30+ minutes a day of cardiovascular exercise is recommended.

Train your child to eat the right foods, not to diet!

- Introducing dieting as a way of controlling weight often leads to excessive weight gain and eating disorders.

Examples of energy-sustaining snacks:

- Peanut butter or a slice of turkey on whole-wheat bread
- Cottage cheese mixed with fruit
- Trail mix with dried fruit, nuts and seeds
- Yogurt with fruit or Grape Nuts
- Hummus on pita bread or with some fresh vegetables
- A cup of bean soup
- Sliced mozzarella cheese and whole-grain crackers

Encourage your child to drink eight 8-ounce glasses of water everyday.

Dress and Grooming

The most important thing concerning this topic is to keep a sense of humor and perspective. Remember your own clothing choices and style when you were an adolescent. Remember that this is about experimenting with identity.

What you can do to help

- Remember your own teenage years. Styles of dress change and children are inclined to conform as they mature.
- Most teens don't dress in a sloppy or sexy fashion that, although unattractive to parents, is actually indecent. If the issue is indecent dress, simply get rid of the clothing of which you disapprove.
- Don't use high-pressure tactics. Approach this topic from a position of love and concern, emphasizing that you believe in your child's judgment and only want the best for him/her.
- Never call your child a name, because children have a tendency to live up to your expectations of them.
- Allow some independent thought. Different hair or clothing styles, within reason, may help them to express themselves.

Undesirable Friends and Dating

Parents must realize that by the age of 10, peers and classmates become more influential than parents; however, remember that you must be the parent and adult and lead them through it.

What you can do to help

- Do not put your child in a position where he or she has to defend his/her friend.
- Invite this friend to your home and join family activities.
- Provide other contacts.
- Avoid forbidding. If you need to forbid, make sure you have control over the situation.
- Continue doing activities with your child like shopping, going for walks, listening to their music with an open mind, or just tossing the ball in the back yard for a few minutes.
- Know where your child is at all times.



Developmental Characteristics *Children 10–14 Years Old: Early Adolescence*

Emotional

- Moodiness and parent-child conflict increase
- Are often unpredictable
- Need to release energy, often resulting in sudden outbursts of activity
- Seek to become increasingly independent, searching for adult identity and acceptance
- Tend to be self-conscious, lacking in self-esteem, and sensitive to personal criticism
- Behave in ways associated with their gender as sex role identification strengthens
- Believe that personal problems, feelings, and experiences are unique to themselves

Social Characteristics

- Have a strong need to belong to a group and to have peer acceptance; thus, more time is spent with peers
- Friendships are defined by intimacy and loyalty
- Peer groups become organized around cliques, which are based on reputation and stereotypes
- Peer pressure to conform increases
- Experiment with new identities
- Model behavior after older, esteemed students or non-parent adults, in a search for individual identity
- Are dependent on parental beliefs and values but do everything possible to separate themselves as individuals
- Display immature behavior, as social skills lag behind mental and physical maturity
- Are intimidated by their first secondary school experience.

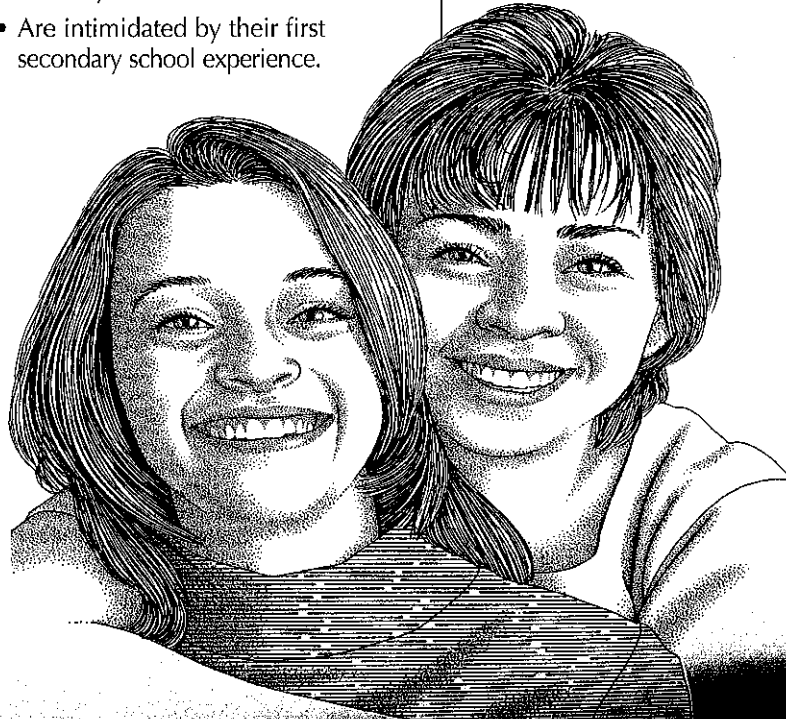
Physical Characteristics

- Experience rapid, irregular physical growth, including brain growth
- Undergo bodily changes that may cause awkward, uncoordinated behavior
- Have varying maturity rates, with girls tending to mature earlier than boys
- Experience restlessness and fatigue due to hormonal changes
- Develop sexual awareness that increases as secondary sex characteristics begin to appear
- Lack physical fitness, with poor levels of endurance, strength, and flexibility

Adapted from Maryland State Department of Education and the Milestones of Development Series.

Intellectual Characteristics

- Display a wide range of individual intellectual development
- Are in a transition period from concrete to abstract thinking
- Can argue more effectively
- Become more self-conscious and self-focused
- Become more idealistic and critical
- Prefer active over passive learning experiences
- Develop an increasingly better understanding of personal abilities
- Have a strong need for approval and may be easily discouraged
- Evaluate vocational options in terms of interests
- Grasps irony and sarcasm
- Are inquisitive about adults, often challenge their authority, and are always watching them



Helpful websites for Parents of Middle School Students

Academic Success

- www.guilderlandschools.org
- www.middleweb.com
- www.greatschools.net
- www.nmsa.org
- www.partnershipforlearning.org
- www.familyandhome.org
- www.parentsjournal.com

Anger Management

- <http://www.apa.org/topics/controlanger.html>
- <http://www.angriesout.com>
- <http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/teens/anger.asp>
- http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/question/emotions/deal_with_anger.html

Bullying

- www.nobullying.org
- www.stopbullyingnow.org
- www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov
- www.kidshealth.org
- www.kidpower.org

Additional Resources

- Covey, Stephen. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families*, Golden Books, 1997.
- Ginsburg, Kenneth. *But I'm Almost 13!* Contemporary, 2002
- Rosenberg, Ellen. *Get a Clue!: A Parent's Guide To Understanding and Communicating With Your Preteen*. Owl Books, 1999
- Hernandez, Michele. *The Middle School Years: Achieving The Best Education For Your Child, Grades 5-8*. Warner, 2000.

Cyber Bullying

- www.cyberbully.org
- www.netsmartz.org
- www.wiredsafety.com
- www.safekids.com
- www.netfamilynews.org
- www.mcgruff.org

Relational Aggression

- www.girlsempowered.com
- www.girlsinc.org
- www.stop-violence.org
- www.clubophelia.com
- www.empowered.org
- www.girlscircle.com
- www.relationalaggression.com
- www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov

Depression

- http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/understanding_depression.html
- <http://www.focusas.com/Depression.html>
- <http://www.about-teen depression.com/>
- <http://www.depression-screening.org/>

Stress

- http://parentingteens.about.com/od/teenwellness/a/deal_stress.htm
- <http://www.adaa.org/>

Undesirable Friends and Dating

- <http://www.socialworkers.org/practice/oneTeen/pdfFiles/adults/datngTips.pdf>

Nutrition and Healthy Lifestyle

- <http://www.nutrition.gov/>
- <http://www.mypyramid.gov/>
- <http://www.eatright.org>

- Stepp, Laura. *Our Last Best Shot: Guiding Our Children Through Early Adolescence*. Riverhead Books, 2000.
- Panzarine, Susan. *A Parent's Guide To The Teen Years: Raising Your 11 to 14 Year-Old In The Age of Chat Rooms and Navel Rings*. Fact On File, 2000.
- Gianetti, Charlene and Sangarese, Margaret. *Parenting 911: How To Safeguard and Rescue Your 10 to 15 Year-Old*. Broadway Books, 1999.
- Gianetti, Charlene, et al. *The Roller-Coaster Years: Raising Your Child Through The Maddening Yet Magical Middle School Years*. Broadway Books, 1997
- Corwin, Donna. *The Tween Years: A Parent's Guide For Surviving Those Terrific, Turbulent, and Trying Times Between Childhood and Adolescence*. Contemporary, 1999.

Notes From a Middle School Child

Don't spoil me.

I know quite well that I ought not to have all I ask for. I am only testing you.

Don't be afraid to be firm with me.

I prefer it. It makes me feel more secure.

Don't let me form bad habits.

I have to rely on you to detect them in the early stages.

Don't correct me in front of people if you can help it.

I'll take much more notice if you talk quietly with me in private.

Don't be upset with me when I say, "I hate you."

It isn't you I hate, but your power to thwart me.

Don't take too much notice of my small ailments.

Sometimes they give me the attention I need.

Don't nag.

If you do I shall have to protect myself by appearing deaf.

Don't make rash promises.

Remember that I feel badly let down when promises are broken.

Don't forget that I cannot explain myself as well as I would like to.

This is why I am not accurate.

Don't be inconsistent.

That completely confuses me and makes me lose faith in you.

Don't tax my honesty too much.

I am easily frightened into telling lies.

Don't put me off when I ask questions.

If you do, you will find that I stop asking and seek my information elsewhere.

Don't tell me my fears are silly.

They are terribly real and you can do much to reassure me if you try to understand.

Don't ever suggest that you are perfect or infallible.

It gives me too great a shock when I discover that you are neither.

Don't ever think that it is below your dignity to apologize to me.

An honest apology makes me feel surprisingly warm to you.

Don't forget how quickly I am growing up.

It must be very difficult for you to keep pace with me, but please try.

Don't forget that I cannot thrive without lots of love, but I don't need to tell you, do I?