

Surviving (Your Child's) Adolescence

Welcome to the hard half of parenting
by Carl Pickhardt, Ph.D.

Adolescence and the transition to middle school

Come middle school, early adolescents collide with secondary education.
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Adolescence

So your son or daughter will enter middle school next fall and you are wondering how to manage the transition? The answer is, "very mindfully" because your child's life is about to undergo a number of significant changes. Here are a few to consider.

MIDDLE SCHOOL IS AN ADJUSTMENT FOR CHILDREN. Middle school is not the same as elementary school. It is a much larger facility and one enters from being at the top of the heap in 5th grade to the bottom of the heap in 6th grade. The greater number of students and being in the lowest grade can cause an entering sixth grader to feel overwhelmed, now counting for less than before.

In addition, school life is very different. Now there are multiple teachers to get used to, more study responsibilities to take care of, increased hall travel between classes, lockers for storing belongings, and a more impersonal feel to how one is being treated. All the while, there is more challenge, push, and shove between students who are jostling for position at an older and more socially aggressive age.

THERE IS ANXIETY ABOUT ENTERING MIDDLE SCHOOL. Talk to fifth graders about what middle school will be like and along with the excitement of growing older are fears about what entry will be like. "Suppose I can't get into my locker?" "Suppose I can't find my way around and am late to class?" "I've heard that middle school teachers are really strict and mean." "Suppose older kids pick on younger kids?" "Suppose I have no one to sit with at lunch?" "Suppose I have no classes with any of my friends?"

Entry anxiety is common. To allay it, going to a school orientation helps as well as parents who normalize fears and assure that within the first week the new school routine will establish a sense of familiarity.

MIDDLE SCHOOL IS AN ADJUSTMENT FOR PARENTS. For parents of entering middle school students, there is also adjusting to do. "This isn't Kansas

anymore," was how one parent described leaving the intimate and welcoming world of a small elementary school for the larger and more daunting secondary setting of middle school. In middle school, the advent of multiple teachers means that none of them know a student as well as one dedicated teacher did in back in elementary school. For the parent, this means there is no one go-to teacher with whom the parent may have cultivated a supportive and collaborative relationship. Parents of elementary students often felt invited in by a teacher responsive to concerns about a child's growth. With fewer students, the elementary teacher could afford to give more individual attention to each child's nurturing and development. In middle school, however, parents can feel kept more at a distance by teachers who seem less responsive and harder to reach because they are now responsible for many more students whom they know less well. This does not mean that middle school teachers are not approachable, only that they have more calls on their time.

THE MIDDLE SCHOOL MISSION IS DIFFERENT. Now teachers seem to focus more on a student's acceptable conduct and adequate performance. As one middle school teacher put it, "We treat kids as less delicate and more responsible here. We don't coddle them. We expect them to act more grown up."

It's not that middle school teachers care less; they care differently. Part of the mission of middle school is helping students learn the self-management and social system skills that will be necessary to successfully cope with high school. Self-management skills include developing the discipline to keep track of homework and the work ethic to process it on time. These are essential educational responsibilities students must learn to assume.

What are the social system skills? Although not formally stated, they are still very clear: "Comply with rules, Conform to routines, Cooperate with authority." If a young person doesn't learn adequate self-management responsibility and social system skills (the 3C's) in middle school, he or she will have a harder time making it through high school - an even larger, more impersonal facility, with less tolerance for off task and socially disruptive behavior.

This is why parents need to throw the full weight of their supervision behind the development of study skills and help their child learn from infractions at school to fit in and go along, with no need to double punish at home for consequences the school has already applied.

EARLY ADOLESCENCE BRINGS A CHANGE FOR THE WORSE. Around ages 9 - 13 a child usually starts separating from childhood into early adolescence. By middle school, most students are being transformed and destabilized by this first adolescent stage. They start pulling away, pushing against, and getting around adult authority in order to create more freedom to grow and to live on more independent terms. Now complaints, arguments, delays, disobedience, and testing limits become part of the young person's

repertoire at home and at school as both parents and teachers find themselves contending with more active and passive resistance.

And now comes the great incompatibility that riddles middle school education: the collision between the onset of adolescent resistance in students this age with the more stringent demands of middle school for self-management and social adjustment. "The middle school crunch" is created at a time when there is increasing pressure on the student to live within a more complicated and demanding educational system, but early adolescent determination to act more independently makes this adjustment harder to do. Compared with elementary school, disciplinary referrals usually go up in middle school.

THERE IS A DISCIPLINARY DISCREPANCY. Factor in puberty (which begins for most students during middle school, and about which children should be told) when the task of defining and asserting young manhood and young womanhood begins, and a common discrepancy arises. Now disciplinary referrals for boys are significantly greater than for girls as male students may express their sense of emerging manhood by being more resistant to being told what to do by adult authorities, particularly when in front of their peers. To reduce the need to establish self-respect by asserting social opposition, encourage your child to develop multiple sources of self-esteem - others ways to challenge and affirm oneself by developing interests and capacities.

SOCIAL CRUELTY GETS WORSE. Come early adolescence both boys and girls become more socially aggressive with each other as they jostle for a place to socially belong among their independent community of peers. This need becomes more important as they experience less childhood closeness to parents and family at home. Now social cruelty at school comes into serious play -- treating each other meanly as a means to secure social membership and standing. Most commonly attacked are students who appear "different," for example who depart from sexual ideals of the age -- boys who appear unmanly (small and weak) and girls who appear unwomanly (fat and not pretty.) Even if they don't give or receive it a lot, they see the five forms of social cruelty occurring all around them - teasing, exclusion, bullying, rumoring, and ganging up. And they know that what is happening to others could happen to them. Middle school is less socially safe than elementary school in this way.

I remember a teacher once, partly in jest, telling me that what every middle school needed were mechanisms to minimize the social damages. He proposed having a referee station to regulate fights between boys, and a rumor control center where girls could go to find out the current gossip being circulated against them. His humorous conclusion: "With so much else going on that feels more important than classroom learning, maybe we should just declare a moratorium on middle school education."

Knowing that relationships can become harsher at this age, parents need to

communicate this understanding to their son or daughter. They might want to say: "Should mean treatment in the forms of teasing, exclusion, bullying, rumoring, or ganging up come your way, please tell us so you have someone who loves you who can support you and can help coach you through it." And be sure to enroll your child in other social circles outside of school so that should classmate relationships become difficult for a while, there are other groups of peers with whom one can comfortably belong.

THERE IS AN EARLY ADOLESCENT ACHIEVEMENT DROP. With all the forgoing changes, particularly the priority to socially belong, it is no wonder that for many young people there is a loss of traditional academic focus and motivation, and with this loss an "early adolescent achievement drop" can occur as schoolwork is resisted, neglected, or forgotten. (See March 15, 2009 blog.) A good measure of middle school distractibility is the dramatic surge in electronic communication at this age - cell phone texting, computer messaging, social networking -to keep one self adequately socially connected to peers. Parents need to monitor and moderate this use. Here is where some middle school teachers give parents the wrong message: "Just let her not do the work, fail, and she will learn more responsibility from the consequences." No. Most young people at this age do not self-correct from academic failure that results from falling effort. They simply adjust to working less and to accepting more failure as okay, when it is not.

Let the early adolescent achievement drop occur and evidence of competence is lost, capacity to work is lessened, and self-esteem goes down as performance lowers. In fact, parents must be diligent in sufficiently supervising schoolwork, particularly homework, so that adequate operating capacity and achievement is maintained. Middle School is a minefield of developmental challenges for students, a time when significant parental supervision and support must be given. Summarizing, here are ten steps parents can take to support a successful entry and passage through middle school.

1. Understand that middle school is not elementary school.
2. Identify and allay common entry fears of middle school.
3. Expect early adolescent changes in your child.
4. Supervise the completion of all homework.
5. Support learning to function in a large secondary system.
6. Declare your desire to be told about any social cruelty that occurs.
7. Inform your child about the normal changes that come with puberty.
8. Enroll your child in social circles outside of school.
9. Encourage the development of multiple sources of self-esteem.
10. Monitor and moderate the increased need for electronic communication (cell phone texting, computer messaging, and social networking.)

For more about parenting adolescents, see my book, "SURVIVING YOUR CHILD'S ADOLESCENCE" (Wiley, 2013.) Information at: www.carlpickhardt.com