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How To Help Your Kid Survive Middle School

Abstract

"The middle school years can be challenging for both the young adolescents and their parents. But while we might sometimes talk about the "troubled times" of adolescence, we have to be careful not to create a self-fulfilling prophecy for the kids."

Posting about the challenges of growing children from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/how-to-help-your-kid-survive-middle-school/>

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Comments

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How To Help Your Kid Survive Middle School

 [all in allthings.org/how-to-help-your-kid-survive-middle-school/](http://allthings.org/how-to-help-your-kid-survive-middle-school/)

Dave Mulder

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2016

Ah, middle school...everyone's favorite time of life! Well, perhaps not. Most grown-ups would probably not choose to revisit their years in junior high school.¹ The middle school years can be challenging for both the young adolescents and their parents. But while we might sometimes talk about the "troubled times" of adolescence, we have to be careful not to create a self-fulfilling prophecy for the kids. So let's take a few minutes to understand some of the developmental characteristics of young adolescents, and then consider how parents can support them as they grow and mature.

Young Adolescent Development

I was a middle school teacher for fourteen years, and one of the things I loved the most about working with young adolescents on a daily basis—and perhaps one of the reasons many adults would not want to do so—is the *tremendous* development taking place within a group of middle school students. There is more development that takes place during early adolescence than at any other time outside of the first year of life. Kids are growing and changing in a myriad of different ways, all at the same time: physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially, and spiritually.

This development, however, occurs unevenly within individuals, and this is what makes parenting (and teaching) middle schoolers such an adventure: a burst of emotional development, a sudden growth spurt of physical development. This means that there is also tremendous *diversity* among a group of young adolescents. You might find a grade 6 boy who is clearly developing cognitively far faster than his classmates, but is "behind" the group physically. Or perhaps an 7th grade girl who is really a young woman, physically speaking, while still very much a "little girl" in terms of her social and emotional development and not prepared for the attention she might receive from older boys. Or picture an 8th grade boy who needs to shave every day and has gone through five different shoe sizes in the past year, but struggles mightily to control his emotions and seems ready to fight back or even burst into tears at the slightest criticism. While many of these differences will begin to even out by high school, it can be difficult to know how to meet the developmental needs of a young adolescent who is growing through these changes.

What Parents Can Do to Help

Ideally, the school and home will be working together to create a developmentally appropriate learning environment for the kids; this means there are some things that parents can and should do at home as well. Here are a few considerations for parents as they support their children in the transition to middle school.

- Developing bodies need to move! Childhood obesity is a real problem in the U.S. today; getting active outdoors can help with this. Kids should be active for *at least* 60 minutes every day. Physical education classes and intramural sports count, but this might not be enough. Encouraging participation in a team sport, or taking up an active hobby, or planning to meet up with a friend to walk, jog, or bike regularly are all good strategies. This also can be a support to your young adolescent's social development.
- Kids need to have the hygiene talk. Hopefully this happens in health class at school, but parents may need to have an ongoing conversation at home too. There are often social repercussions for kids who don't take care of their bodies; following social norms such as wearing deodorant, bathing regularly, and other personal grooming needs are expected. Approach this talk gently—some kids are very sensitive to these physical changes—but a light-hearted approach can help.

- Many middle schoolers will experience an increase in appetite, but they do not always make wise food choices. Make breakfast a normal part of the routine; it's hard for kids to focus on learning if their stomachs are growling! Snacking is normal, but encouraging moderation in eating junk food and “empty calories,” and making healthy choices available is helpful. Sending healthy snacks along to school is also a wise strategy.
- Prioritizing having an evening meal together as a family whenever possible. Eating together is important for helping to set healthy eating habits, and has many other benefits as well. While many young adolescents push back against their parents out of desire for independence, they need a loving, caring, supportive environment. Conversation over meals can be a great way to connect with kids. Making time for family devotions and praying together is also a valuable way to continue to foster faith development.
- Asking, “How was your day?” might only get a grunt in response. More specific questioning such “What did you do in science class today?” or “Who did you sit with at lunch?” might get more informative responses. But be careful not to press too much; remember that young adolescents have a developing sense of independence, and it is normal that they will want to keep some parts of their lives private. (Do you remember feeling like your parents were always grilling you with questions? Your young adolescent might be feeling the same way!) This can be a fine balance to walk, but strive for open lines of communication, reassuring them that you are willing to listen, and try not to pry *too*
- Young adolescents need plenty of sleep. With their busy schedules, homework may be pushed off until evening, and the draw of technological entertainment and social media can be significant for them as well. Encourage reasonable limits—like no cell phones or video games after 9:00 pm—to help encourage getting to bed on time.
- Homework may become a battleground area for some families. Arranging for a specific time and place to work on homework can help. Junior high schools often begin to increase the amount of homework expected of students. Depending on the particular arrangement of the school, a young adolescent may have four or more different teachers on a daily basis. Many of these teachers may assign homework with little communication with the others, which means that homework can really pile up! Keep clear lines of communication with teachers about homework expectations, and don't be afraid to share your experience at home with the teachers.
- Getting a handle on spiritual development for middle schoolers can be tricky; there is an old adage that faith is more often “caught” than “taught.” However, there are things the school, church, and home can do to foster faith formation in young adolescents. Middle schoolers are likely to ask hard questions related to faith, and they need honest answers—even when the answer is “I don't know.” This is a responsibility for parents, Christian teachers, and church leaders alike. They need to feel like they are valued members of their church community, and need to be invited to participate in the life of the church. Intergenerational ministry opportunities (i.e., members of several different generations serving together) may be an ideal way to both build relationships and foster faith development.

The middle school years can be turbulent and challenging, but they do not have to be. It is important to keep in mind that the things young adolescents are experiencing are *very real for them*. While we might be tempted to say things like, “Oh, grow up!” or “Stop being so dramatic!”, but the fact is, they *are* growing up, and the drama they are experiencing is part of their development. We should not minimize this or downplay it; we need to acknowledge that these changes are real and are happening, and we need to help middle schoolers figure out how to deal with it.

Remember that adolescence is a process of “becoming,” a sort of already-but-not-yet time of life. So celebrate the changes you see in your young adolescent! Who do you want your middle schooler to become? Remember that our job as parents is to work ourselves out of a job, helping them to grow up into independent, capable adults.

Here are a few other resources for parents of young adolescents that may prove beneficial:

- [“What’s Best for Kids? Tips for Parents“](#) from the Association for Middle Level Education
- [“The Middle School”](#) – A reference sheet for parents of young adolescents with creative tips for helping them flourish
- [“10 Ways to Help Your Child Succeed in Middle School”](#) from KidsHealth.org
- *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* by danah boyd is an excellent book to help parents and educators understand social media and it’s magnetic pull on adolescents, and the full text is [available on her website](#) free of charge. I highly recommend reading this book!