



P-05 • Fall 2002

of special interest to... **PARENTS**

Making the Jump to Middle School

Middle school—it's a whole different world! To the outside observer it looks like barely-controlled chaos. A bell rings, doors burst open, and a quiet corridor becomes an instant river of high energy: very noisy, a little clumsy, intensely physical. The river churns as students jostle each other, pose and show off, shout greetings, slam locker doors. Another bell rings, the bubbling horde disappears into various doorways, and it's quiet again.

There's obviously a lot happening—but we as parents don't always see it or recognize it or understand it. Oh, how we miss the simpler days of elementary school age, when we could figure out what was going on and how we could help!

The joys and challenges of middle-school age

Middle-school age is a roller-coaster ride. In children's development, the 11-to-14 age is the second big all-at-once burst of growth. (Birth-to-3 is the first burst, obviously.) So from age 11 to age 14, our children are experiencing more physical, intellectual, and emotional changes than they have since they were toddlers! As a result of all these changes going on, kids of middle school age

- eat an astonishing amount
- don't know what to do with their arms and legs

- grow out of their clothes (especially shoes!) every few months
- feel great surges of energy alternating with exhaustion
- laugh a lot
- cry a lot
- challenge everything
- try out and discard new attitudes and ideas
- are hypersensitive to what's cool and what's not
- are usually nervous about how they look
- want to be respected as individuals
- don't want to stand out in a crowd
- want to be independent
- want to hang onto childhood
- want their parents to take them seriously
- can't stand being seen with their parents

Sound familiar?! It's a time of contradictions, no doubt about it. The title of one excellent book on parenting for this age group gets it just right: *Get Out of My Life But First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?* (Anthony E. Wolf, New York: Noonday Press, 1991.)

What's a parent to do? For starters, we can remind ourselves that changes and contradictions and wild mood swings are all part of the experience. In a sense, these are positive evidence that the middle-schooler is doing his or her "job"—see the Ten Tasks of Adolescents (next page).

Our job as parents is to stay calm. Stay compassionate. Stay connected and supportive—that’s more important now than ever before! It also helps to keep a sense of perspective and a sense of humor. Tell yourself again and again: It’s a phase. It’s normal. Everything’s going to be OK.

THE TEN TASKS OF ADOLESCENTS

1. Adjust to sexually maturing bodies
2. Develop and apply abstract thinking—to think about possibilities or test different ways of solving a problem
3. Acquire the ability to understand human relationships—to put themselves in another person’s shoes
4. Develop new skills in decision making, problem solving, and conflict resolution
5. Identify moral standards, values, and belief systems
6. Understand and express more complicated emotions
7. Form friendships that are close and supportive
8. Establish key parts of their personal identity
9. Take on increasingly mature roles and responsibilities
10. Renegotiate relationships with parents—balancing independence with ongoing connection

—A. Rae Simpson, *Raising Teens*

The middle school experience itself

Just being 11 or 12 or 13 or 14 is challenge enough. The nature of the middle school itself brings another set of changes and challenges. Repeat it over and over to yourself like a mantra: Middle school is not like elementary school—nor should it be!

Yes, it’s a big jump. Preparation and a positive attitude will help a lot. It’s easy for kids and parents alike to focus on how big and scary and different middle school will be. We shouldn’t let ourselves get stuck on that thought! It’s much more positive to think of middle school as “high school with training wheels” and value it as a brand new set of experiences and opportunities designed for this energetic, curious, lively age group.

True, many of your concerns about middle school are real. You may fear getting lost in a system

where your child’s friends, teachers, school assignments, and academic progress aren’t as easy to keep track of any more. And *uh-oh*, isn’t this the age when kids begin to experiment with sex, drugs, and alcohol?

Time to swallow hard and realize that middle school is just one more step in the process of your child’s becoming an adult. The fact is, middle school is a *necessary* transition time between elementary school and high school. It’s a place your child will accomplish some important intellectual and social development. Good middle schools provide the opportunity for kids to gradually take on more responsibility for their education while exploring new activities *and* having fun.

Nitty gritty details: What new middle schoolers worry about most

The defining difference between the typical elementary school and the typical middle school is simple. Instead of staying in the same room with the same group of fellow students all day long, with just one teacher to teach all (or at least most) subjects, students move from room to room where different teachers teach different subjects.

There are many other differences too (see the chart on the last page), but going from room to room for different class periods is the biggie—and one that can cause some anxiety for a new middle-schooler.

Here are the things that new middle-schoolers are most worried about. Parents and other concerned adults can help a lot by acknowledging these and finding positive ways to help the middle-schoolers work through the “what happens if?” anxieties.

➤ **Where to go next.** Right at first, at least, students worry about forgetting which class comes next and what room it meets in—and exactly where that room is. It takes a while to master the geography of a new, probably much larger, school campus and get into a rhythm of what happens where when. Finding the bathrooms and the cafeteria is another typical—and perfectly understandable!—concern.

➤ **Lockers.** This is very real! Suddenly the student is responsible not just for going from classroom to

classroom but for ducking into the locker hall between classes to get the right books and supplies.

What happens if I can't remember the combination or if the lock gets stuck? And (no joke, this is a frequently-asked-question at orientation days) what happens if I get locked inside of a locker, how do I get out?

➤ **Getting to class on time.** Nervousness about being late to classes is tangled up with “*where is my next class?*” and “*where are the restrooms?*” and “*how do I work my locker?*” and navigating around an unfamiliar campus at the pace required by the school size and bell schedule.

➤ **Gym.** Physical Education class is another big difference between elementary and middle school. Changing in and out of gym clothes in a hurry and in full view of numerous classmates takes some getting used to for kids worried about their bodies. And we haven't even mentioned the showers!

Am I normal? Do I look weird? Is everybody looking at me? —Probably not, they are all worrying whether everybody is looking at *them*.

➤ **School bus.** Middle schools collect students from a much larger area than elementary schools do, so more students are likely to be on buses every day.

How will I find the right bus? What happens if I get on the wrong bus? How will I get home if I get on the wrong bus, or miss the bus completely?

➤ **Being on the bottom of the pecking order.** Starting middle school is often the first time that a child experiences leaving the top of one social structure to take a place at the bottom of another one. Even in the best-ordered, best-administered schools, rumors of hazing rituals and other hazards may circulate among worried sixth-graders.

Will the seventh- and eight-graders be mean to me just because I'm a sixth-grader? How mean? Will they really stuff me into a garbage can?

Challenges for parents

When our kids were younger, it was pretty easy to stay connected with the teachers and the school office. In middle school, it takes a little more effort and a little more awareness. As a result, parents' involvement in their children's education tends to

drop off sharply when the children approach their teens. This is too bad! Middle school is exactly the *wrong* time to become disengaged. These are critical years in terms of our children's academic and social development, and they need us to be involved more than ever.

Staying connected to the school. If having multiple teachers for multiple subjects is confusing for our children, it's also confusing for us. The comparative size and complexity of the school organization can also be discouraging. Somehow the middle school campus seems less welcoming than the elementary school campus did; we may feel uncomfortable at the new school, less certain that it's OK for us to visit and ask questions.

We have to stick with it! Research indicates that children are more successful throughout their education if their parents take an active part in it. The newest studies show that parent involvement makes a difference throughout middle school, high school, *and* college. So get ready for many more years of parent meetings, poetry contests, band concerts, and science and technology fairs!

Staying connected to our children. Learning how to connect with our children's education during the middle school years is no easy task. Our kids may squirm at the very thought of us showing up at school. Although they might act like they don't want to have us around at all, middle school is the *most* important time for us to be involved.

Parent involvement during the middle school years calls for less hands-on work in the classroom and more behind-the-scenes work at home. We can still bake brownies for class parties, but we should think more about being our children's backup, advocate, and audience.

Another important role for middle school parents is thinking *ahead* for our sons and daughters. In *Help! I've Got a Middle Schooler!* I describe ways to help identify and encourage a child's interests, skills, and strengths. Next we need to think about how middle school can help our kids build on those interests, skills, and strengths. What courses should middle-school students take to prepare for high school and beyond? Though graduation day may seem a long, long way off, *now* is the time to determine what

skills the student will need to start mastering in order to continue education after high school.

What you and I can do to make a difference

There is a lot that we can do to make the jump to middle school easier for our kids.

We can find out what might be making our children anxious and help them work through those fears—without expressing too much anxiety ourselves. For some kids, just being heard and taken seriously is enough. Others need and want more coaching on problem-solving. In any case, we can give our children chances to get their fears out into the open, acknowledge them, then deal with them matter-of-factly. For example, we can help them past “locker anxiety” by practicing with other combination locks. We can let them choose a back-pack or book bag and practice packing and unpacking it.

We can go to any and all orientation activities that the middle school puts on. We can visit the school campus several times to get acquainted with the layout. We can help a nervous son practice getting from the gym to the cafeteria to the bathrooms to the bus-loading zone. We can encourage a nervous daughter to draw her own map of where things are. Familiarity erases fear.

In conversation with our children, we can stress the many good things about middle school: meeting new people, gaining independence, learning to take responsibility for time and work. Even working through the nervous “what if” scenarios can be turned into a positive experience. Look at how they are learning to analyze a situation and take action to take control!

Finally, we can be prepared to put more effort into staying involved in our children’s education in the new ways required by the new stage in their lives. It won’t be so easy any more. But the payoff for our children’s future is tremendous!

Most things in their lives are changing;
don’t let your love be one of them.

—A. Rae Simpson, *Raising Teens*

Resources and References

A. Rae Simpson, Ph.D., *Raising Teens: A Synthesis of Research and a Foundation for Action*, Project on the Parenting of Adolescents, Center for Health Communications, Harvard School of Public Health, 2001. No longer in print; available on the Web at www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/parenting/report.pdf

Susan M. Quattrociochi, Ph.D., *Help! I've Got a Middle Schooler!* Bellevue, WA: Bellevue Community College, 2002. For information about ordering copies, call (425) 564-2352.

How different will middle school be?

<i>typical elementary school</i>	<i>typical middle school</i>
one teacher teaches most or all subjects	different teachers teach the different subjects
student stays with the same group of other students all day	student could be in a different group in each subject (there is often quite a bit of overlap)
student stays in one room most of the day, has one desk to keep books, etc. in	student goes from room to room, keeps books, lunch, etc. in a locker
teacher has comparatively few students, can spend more time with each one	teacher has many students, doesn't have as much time with each one
teacher gets a fuller picture of each student	teacher sees each student in more focused perspective
one teacher plans all homework assignments, quizzes, tests, etc., so assignments are more coordinated	each teacher plans homework and tests independently, so assignment pile-ups are more likely
school facilities are usually on a smaller scale (size of campus; size of rooms, equipment, etc.)	school facilities are usually on a larger scale: bigger campus, more and bigger buildings
school has comparatively few students	school has comparatively many students
students come from a smaller geographical area	students come from a larger geographical area
school has comparatively few administrators, teachers, and staff members	school administration is larger, and more specialized and compartmentalized
most subject matter being taught is familiar to most parents, so it's easier for them to help with homework	some subject matter is intimidating to some parents, so it's harder for them to help with homework
school atmosphere tends to feel more relaxed	school atmosphere tends to feel busier, more regimented
there are more "built in" opportunities for communication & parent involvement (e.g., days scheduled for parent-teacher conferences)	the "built in" opportunities for communication and involvement are fewer and more limited