

Navigating Your Child's Adolescence



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Before the Journey Begins: Introduction

WELCOME TO THE WATER

You and your young adolescent have embarked on the journey of a lifetime. Your feet are already wet from wading through childhood together, and you're looking at traveling through the middle-school years.

The trip gets faster now. The waters churn, and the waves look bigger. You'll find quite a few thrills and maybe even a spill or two along the way. But the journey is exciting and well worth the effort.

As you prepare for this trip with your child, consider how you learned things when you were young.

Who taught you most of what you know? How to strap on a life jacket? How to steer? How to handle an emergency?

It's a good bet a parent taught you life's most important lessons, by example, if not by direct instruction.

It's hard to really separate parenting and teaching. As a parent, you try to live the ideals you teach. As a teacher, you try to teach the ideals you live.

There's not much glamour associated with parenting or teaching nowadays. Both are tough jobs made even tougher by the way the roles overlap. The jobs are especially challenging in the middle-school years. The physical, emotional and social obstacles faced by adolescents seem to dwarf "smaller" problems like homework assignments and tests. It's easy to see how school can take a back seat to growing up.

The middle-school years aren't difficult only for children. This is a time when you, as a parent, face changes in your own life as you watch your children mature. Quite possibly, by helping your children learn more about themselves and the world around them, you learn something, too, about yourself.

As a parent, you seek the best for your children, in and out of school. You want to know how to teach and how to reach your youngsters. You want to know how to talk to your children and how to be a good role model. You want information on peer pressures, drugs, sex and alcohol. But you aren't sure how to discuss these topics with your kids.

BellSouth has a strong commitment to education, and we hope this publication offers ways to help direct and understand your middle schooler through involvement and communication. *Navigating Your Child's Adolescence* is designed to help you teach and reach your child now when your help is needed most.



You Paddle, I'll Steer: The Importance of Parental Involvement

If you could ask for a prescription that would help you raise your child to a fulfilled adulthood, you might consider this one, written by a 15-year-old middle schooler in North Carolina.

"If I were born with all of my knowledge at birth, I would have said to my parents something like this: As I grow, push, but do not shove; talk, but do not scream; teach, but do not lecture; hold me, but do not pull me; guide, but do not take my place; and lastly, love me without measure."

This student might have added one thing: "Be actively involved in my school life."

Research shows that, when a parent is actively involved, children at every age do better in school. Not surprisingly, schools are more successful when parents are involved. Children post higher grades and test scores, and they develop positive can-do attitudes backed up with action.

Parents foster high achievement at school with the right kind of support at home. Successful learning patterns show up almost universally in the homes of high-achievers. What are they?

- Open communication between parents and children.
- Clear-cut definitions of right and wrong behavior that are understood and met by all members of the family, not just the children.
- Regular routines, especially for meals and bedtime.
- An emphasis on reading and homework. Let them see you reading.
- Close contact with the school, so that the child, teacher and parent all know what is expected.

These patterns are true for academic excellence no matter what the child's age.



The Next Crest: Who is Your Middle Schooler Becoming

The ages from 10-15 years mark a critical period in human development. Youngsters grow by leaps and bounds. They gain weight, lose their baby fat and develop sexually.

The changes are not only physical ones. Middle schoolers also develop thinking skills that prepare them for adulthood. They begin to discover a sense of their own identity, to understand abstract concepts like "right and wrong," "justice and injustice." They begin to think about friends, family and the future in different ways.

As a parent of a middle schooler, you don't have to be told how profound these changes are. They can be disturbing to your child and worrisome for you. The best help you can give your child is to understand these changes and be there for support during this occasionally awkward, but often rewarding time of life.

It is extremely important for you to keep in mind that every adolescent is different from the next. Just like flowers in a garden, not every child blooms at the same time, grows at the same rate or requires the same amount of nurturing. You'll find that patience is not just a virtue, but a survival skill when dealing with a middle schooler.

Common traits do exist for most 10- to 15-year-olds. You'll probably be seeing at least a few of these behavior patterns:

- Early adolescents alternate white-hot bursts of emotional and physical energy with long periods of "vegging out," basically doing nothing productive (at least by adult standards).
- Kids in this age group take risks, asking for dates, for instance, but getting their feelings hurt easily.
- Youngsters simultaneously crave tender loving care from their parents, even as they ask for more independence.
- Youngsters focus intensely on their own interests and privacy, but at the same time, they are concerned with what peer groups think of them.
- Middle schoolers want more privileges, but they may have difficulty accepting the responsibility that comes with them.
- Middle schoolers begin to be aware of social issues.



Sights You'll Share Along the Journey: Ways Your Adolescent is Developing

The development of an adolescent can be divided into four main areas: physical, intellectual, social and emotional. Emotional growth occurs in relation to changes in the other three areas, rather than standing alone. In order to help you know who your child is becoming, you should know what to expect in each area. When you know what to expect, you'll recognize the unexpected, and you'll be better able to deal with it. Some adolescents may do disturbing things, but they are not disturbed. Just keep in mind that variability is the norm for young adolescents, both in kids the same age, and within the same youth from one time to another.

PHYSICAL CHANGES

In the middle school years, physical growth is more dramatic than at any other time in life, except infancy. When this development starts, and how quickly it is finished, varies widely from one child to the next.

What is the most obvious change of early adolescence? Puberty, of course. This is the time of life when reproduction first becomes possible. The onset of sexual maturity can begin for some girls as early as age eight and for others as late as age 15. For boys, expect puberty somewhere between the ages 10 to 16.

The changes in height and weight that occur during these years may make young adolescents feel awkward. Actual "growing pains," caused by bones and muscles developing at different rates, are common. That's one reason adolescents may lounge in awkward positions while watching TV or talking on the phone – they're just trying to get comfortable.

Adolescents begin their growth spurt at different ages, and they grow at different rates. This may cause problems. Take the example of a girl who grows taller than her classmates, or the boy who is shorter than his peers due to late development. These are normal variations, but middle schoolers may need extra attention and support from you to help them feel normal.

Most children need sensitivity and support as they deal with sexual maturity, too. You should take extra care to reassure early or late developers that they are normal and relieve some of their self-consciousness.

The secondary sex characteristics – those things that make boys and girls look more like men and women – can also cause self-consciousness. Some changes are not really noticeable to others. But the development of girl's breasts, for example, can be highly conspicuous. So are the voices that change and hair on the body. Some anxiety almost always accompanies these changes, especially if they come early or late. Again, take pains to reassure your adolescent that he or she is normal. Everyone faces these changes.

It is perfectly normal behavior for the young adolescent to exhibit both frantic levels of energy and apparent laziness in a short period of time. The high energy/low energy cycle alarms many parents, who have steadier, slower rhythms of energy. The "bouncing off-the-walls" energy level can plunge within minutes, sending your child off alone to listen to music or sulk in a bedroom. Before you act on your own resentment or annoyance, remind yourself that your child doesn't know why he or she acts that way. This behavior seems completely natural to a middle schooler. Your criticism may make the child feel nothing he or she does is "right."

The physical changes of puberty can contribute to a general feeling young adolescents may share of being "out of control." They may feel awkward, self-conscious and different. It will help if you can prepare them for these physical changes, and if you can empathize with what your child is going through.

THINKING SKILLS

The intellectual development of a middle schooler is just as dramatic as the physical development. Adolescents gradually move beyond thinking based only on their personal, "real" experiences in the present (concrete thinking) to thinking that is more hypothetical and future oriented (abstract thinking). Your child may be able to imagine what the future might be like, or what he or she might do as a "grown up."

WHAT CHANGES SHOULD YOU WATCH FOR IN YOUR CHILD'S THINKING SKILLS?

Just as there may be variations in physical energy levels, there may be fluctuations in intellectual ability. A child who grasps a difficult concept in algebra today, may not be able to understand the same concept on a test tomorrow. These very natural ups and downs can frustrate teachers and parents. But they are a part of the maturing process. Patience will pay off.

- *Middle schoolers tend to focus on themselves a great deal, even as their minds begin to embrace larger ideas. You shouldn't worry that a child sometimes seems utterly self-absorbed and self-centered, while at other times, is very concerned about others. It's a natural reaction, given all the changes the adolescent is going through.*

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

You may see these common traits among middle schoolers as they interact with you and their peers:

Middle schoolers' tendency to turn attention inward is the search for their personal identity or "self." Adolescents describe their personal identity based on their hobbies, beliefs, and physical appearance. Your child is actually trying on many different "selves" in order to find his or her true identity. At the same time, there is an almost paradoxical growth in the adolescent's need for other intimate relationships.

Often, they turn to adults outside the family, such as teachers and coaches.

- *Friends become increasingly important. Parents will see children stand up for the right to pick their own friends at this age, especially if they feel a choice of friends is being forced on them. This tendency to "dig in heels" is a healthy sign. It means the youngster is beginning to assert an identity.*
- *Adolescents sometimes have difficulty controlling their feelings. Occasional outbursts of tears, sarcastic "backtalk," a hair-trigger temper, or a remarkable ability to nurse grudges shouldn't surprise you. Nor should spontaneous tenderness and affection.*
- *Perhaps the most important part of the social development of a middle schooler will be peer acceptance. Your kid may obsessively worry over having the "right" shoes, clothes or hair-style. These things are tremendously important to adolescents, as they seek their identity.*

- *Adolescence marks a period during which there is a growing concern with social issues and idealism. Association acceptance by a group helps young people feel good about themselves. The process of building friendships aids in their adult relationships later on, too.*

You might worry about the overpowering need an adolescent feels to “be like the others.” But keep in mind, studies have shown that middle schoolers remain close to their parents’ values, even as they struggle for the autonomy to make choices. Studies also indicate that the extent to which adolescents spend time with their peers and turn to them for advice depends on the way their parents’ behavior changed in response to their growing up. When children perceive their parents as becoming stricter as they progress into adolescence, they respond by turning to their peers. Alternately, when they perceive their parents as including them in family decisions and encouraging them to express their ideas, they do not orient themselves to their peers as much. While the peer group may influence superficial things, like a hair style, your child still really craves your adult guidance and supervision, and needs to know that you will listen.

- *Although self-esteem generally increases during adolescence, teens may suffer dips in self-esteem and have tremendous anxiety over their looks, sexual development and privacy. These big worries often are expressed as an anxiety over things that, from parents’ perspectives, may look relatively minor – a bad report card, a pimple, a broken date. Just keep in mind that young people who feel good about themselves and feel that others care about them almost always handle serious disappointments, uncertainties and tragedies better.*
- *Risk taking is signature social behavior at this age and is one that worries parents most. During the middle-school years, your adolescent may feel almost immortal, with never a thought that someday life will end. In an age when minds are developing new powers and abilities, it’s part of an adolescent’s social development to experiment, to push the limits, to take risks.*

There’s no easy way to keep from worrying about a child who insists on exploring the line between risk and danger. Just remember that it’s natural to experiment. But also know that “risky behavior” today is far more dangerous than it was when you grew up.

How do you deal with risk taking? It’s important to know what your child is thinking. Stay in touch. Set clear limits. Young adolescents want and need communication and closeness, even though they may choose to reject it often, when offered. It’s important for parents to be patient and keep offering.

- *Finally, you are likely to find your child suddenly argumentative on the most trivial of subjects. Before you put on the boxing gloves, remember that the growing cognitive powers inside your teen’s head are like a shiny new car, just waiting for a test drive. For the first time, your child may be able to dream up alternatives to the traditional ways of doing things ... and may be less ready to accept “because I said so” for an answer.*



Troubled Waters: Knowing When to Worry

As changeable as they are, most middle schoolers are just playing out the tried-and-true script of adolescence. Just because some adolescent behavior is irritating or worrisome does not mean it is dangerous. It may sound crazy, but middle schoolers are supposed to be that way.

Eighty percent of all adolescents mature without serious problems. Still, some behaviors, if they are intense and persistent, can signal that a problem goes deeper than normal.

There's one tip for knowing whether professional help is necessary: A young person with true emotional problems will not stop or change behavior despite lectures, stricter rules or punishment. That's when you need to worry ... and seek professional help.

You might want to seek professional help for your child if you see the warning signs of true emotional disturbances.

WARNING SIGNS OF EMOTIONAL DISTURBANCES:

- A child is withdrawn for long stretches of time and shows no interest in others.
- A child has no friends the same age and no peer group.
- A child seems too docile, never acting independently and never initiating activity.
- A child tries again and again to run away from home or school.
- A child gets into many fights and bullies or hurts others.
- A child is sexually promiscuous.
- A child is often drunk or high on drugs.
- A child worries about appearance so much that he or she loses a dangerous amount of weight.
- A child's school performance declines.
- A child has severe mood swings.



Helping Stay the Course: Responding to Changing Needs

If many parents could rub a magic lamp and have the great genie grant a wish, many would ask for answers to some hard questions: How can I best help my child deal with a new sexual awareness? What does this newly independent tone in Jimmy's voice mean? Vanessa wants to spend the week with a girlfriend instead of taking a vacation with the family. What do I say? How do I respond to the changing needs of my child?

You can answer these questions. A relationship between parents and children can be positive. But it is important to remember that, again, a parent's wisdom and sacrifice is required. The best relationships change in response to the shifting needs and abilities of the middle schooler. Not vice versa.

What are some of the changes you may need to accommodate?

- Your child will probably have an increased need for privacy, due to increased self-consciousness.
- Your child may want a greater role in family decisions, due to the development of new thinking skills.
- You may find it necessary to explain the reasoning that prompts parental decisions.
- You will need patience in dealing with conflicts that come up over rules and limits.
- You will need patience in dealing with arguments over little things. Remember, these arguments help your middle schooler develop ideas more clearly and logically.
- You will need an effective way of discussing and resolving conflicts.
- Your child may seem to shift away from you and attach himself to his same-aged peers. You will see an increase in your child's need to be accepted by peers.



Still Waters: Listening

Communication with your middle schooler involves more than just talking or responding to what was said. Listening and watching – trying to see deeper than just the unsure words on the surface – will help you get to the heart of an issue.

A parent who can listen carefully, with an open mind, without judging or criticizing, will hear what is really on a middle schooler's mind more often than not.

Remember that careful listening often heads off conflicts. Consider the example of a father who buys his daughter an expensive blouse, then discovers she won't wear it. Instead of anger, a little exploration might be in order. Is the child beginning to show signs of sexual development? Could she possibly be self-conscious about what the blouse reveals?

Teens who are protective of their privacy may be embarrassed over straightforward questions like, "What's wrong?" Instead, try an open-ended approach like "You're looking sad. If you'd like to talk about it, I'm here." And remember that middle schoolers have the right not to talk about their feelings.

Try to talk honestly to your child, to draw honest answers. Avoid drawing lines in the sand and delivering ultimatums. Nothing turns up the self-assertion dial in a teen like an ultimatum. If conflict rises and there is no resolution, then negotiate.

A parent who is able to communicate will be able to cultivate and support a middle schooler's decision-making skills. And by being in touch – knowing why your child makes decisions – you'll also have a good gauge for weighing the consequences of those decisions.



Still Waters, Part Two: Really Listening

Don't make the mistake of listening only to the words of your middle schooler. You also need to respond to feelings hidden below the words – the unspoken messages. Middle schoolers convey feelings through mannerisms, gestures, appearances and tone of voice.

Again, it's not easy to hone in on the real messages a middle schooler delivers: "Nobody understands! I hate that dress! I don't want to get a haircut!" Right now, your youngster is wrestling with a lot of changes, many of which are confusing. In order to understand the true message, you may need to sharpen your communication skills.



Negotiating a Course: Negotiating With Middle Schoolers

The art of negotiation involves compromises some parents have trouble making. Remember that you don't need to go overboard. While you should listen and respond to real concerns, you don't need to knuckle under to every whim. You have the right to set limits.

At the same time they're enjoying some new-found freedoms, many middle schoolers also find freedom rather scary. Inside almost every rebellious teen who is testing the limits, you'll see a child who craves knowing that the disciplined love of a parent simply won't let them go. Setting limits shows the child that you care. Negotiation allows adolescents some real emotional growth. A greater voice in family decision-making will quickly boost a middle schooler's self-esteem.

Your middle schooler needs to know some things about negotiating, too. The expectations and actions of a parent can vary, just like everyone else's. The things they consider negotiable can change, too. That's only human.

Everyone should know the rules, however, before negotiations start. Some things – curfews or chores – lie on the table ready for deals to be struck. Other things, though, are not negotiable – safety rules and strongly held family values, for example.

Non-negotiable expectations are most effective when they are few, and when the reasons behind them are clearly understood.

A parent should never “win the battle but lose the war” with a child. If you insist on certain limits for the sake of firmness alone, your child may tow the line today, but refuse to discuss more important issues later on. If it doesn’t interfere with important goals and isn’t harmful, simply accept your child’s odd behavior. It will take patience on your part. But remember, your child will learn patience from your example.

A few other points to note: A willingness to open discussion doesn’t mean you’ve caved in. Still, there may be some cases where a compromise cannot be reached. Parents need to be frank about feelings and the reasons behind their expectations. You’ll see that this honesty usually improves family morale and togetherness.

SOME TIPS FOR NEGOTIATING RULES AND LIMITS WITH MIDDLE SCHOOLERS:

- Involve your child in making decisions. You can negotiate or make contracts with him or her. Just be careful to set rules that you, your child and the rest of the family can live with.
- Don’t go overboard with non-negotiable rules. Try to make the household version of the Ten Commandments more relaxed – more like the Ten Suggestions. Make them strong suggestions, but not inflexible.
- Base all rules and limits on logical, sound reasoning. Take the time to explain why certain rules exist, without being defensive. Be ready for challenges and questions.
- Create rules that make your child responsible for his or her behavior.
- Don’t excuse or ignore unacceptable behavior, but also don’t imply that broken rules mean your child is a failure. Share your own shortcomings. Turn the situation into a learning opportunity.
- Be willing to relax rules as your child matures. When the child is ready to handle more responsibility, reward him or her by giving it.



Rowing Together

Sometimes it works to write down an agreement or shake hands on it. That's a contract, just like in business. If both parties agree to abide by the terms, its value as a negotiating tool is clear.

Contracts are usually successful because both parties have helped create the agreement. Neither wants to change what has been bargained for and won.



Your Job as a Pilot

PREPARE MIDDLE SCHOOLERS FOR THEIR TOMORROW ... NOT YOUR PAST

We live in turbulent times – “permanent rough water” is a phrase that aptly describes modern-day living. The only sure thing is change. Your child will need to learn tomorrow's skills now – how to learn and adapt, not how to do things the way they've always been done.

Today's jobs will be greatly changed tomorrow, or they may not even exist. Your child will need to learn how to use information and how to solve problems to work at these jobs. In short, our children must learn how to learn. Whether your child works in a convenience store or a medical research facility, tools will continually grow more sophisticated, and more complex decisions will become part of daily life and work.

The middle-school years are a critical time for children. As ideas and tastes mature, children can learn to like school and value education, or they can be turned off by them. At this critical age, children who fall behind classmates or become bored may never regain an interest in school. For, without understanding, most skills learned in school will not be retained, and will not be available for use throughout life.

The question at hand, then, is how to keep them plugged into education. Here are some ideas:

- *At the end of the fourth grade, your child should have basic reading, writing and computational skills. If not, it's time to remedy the shortfall with some added instruction and concept building. These middle grades may be the last chance to catch up on poor language and math skills. Children entering the middle grades without the basics will not be able to take advantage of new and challenging courses.*
- *Good education in the middle-school years mirrors the intellectual development of students. Abstract thinking functions are emerging, so students should learn more than rote memory facts. They should be taught to think problems through and solve them. They should also learn to take responsibility for their own learning, through school assignments and teamwork with other students.*

A good school will teach your child to become a “flexible learner.” That ability will help them stay on course through the permanent rough water of the age.



Who’s in the Boat? Your Child as a Student Now

It may surprise you to find out your 11-year-old may suddenly be less organized. Still, when you know how many changes are at work in your child’s life, you can appreciate the fact that he or she might be less focused on routines and day-to-day matters. Things may not make sense now because a child sees facts and ideas in isolation – not in a larger context. Only later – at about 13 or 14 – do middle schoolers begin to see relationships among similar ideas, concepts and experiences.

Remind yourself not to worry so much about a change in organizational skills or a hot-and-cold interest level in some subjects. Concentrate instead on reinforcement of basic skills.

It’s important to help a middle schooler understand how to make decisions. Your child is beginning to develop reasoning skills and to assume personal responsibility for learning. Give your child choices – and accept the decision – instead of coercing your child to decide upon your way.

The school environment can help determine what and how much your child learns. In fact, some of their most significant experiences and their most important relationships take place at school.

You’ll help make the environment in that school a healthy one for your child by being informed and involved.



Is the School Shipshape?

Do the middle-school teachers at your child’s school appear to be enthusiastic about spending time with 10-15 year olds? That is a key question you should ask.

Some other characteristics of first-rate school environments include:

- The school combines core academic subjects, art and life skills classes with outside activities.
- Students experience learning through the hands-on use of educational technology.
- Schedules are flexible. Instead of students changing teachers and rooms every 45 minutes, they remain with a team of teachers for longer periods of time.
- The teaching of reading is part of the curriculum.
- Students are encouraged to ask and answer their own questions, and think for themselves.

- A variety of delivery methods are used and students can demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways.
- Help is readily available for students with special learning needs, and they are not separated from other students.
- The school fosters student participation and responsibility. Every parent has a different idea of what a child should get from a good school. It might help to use the checklist on this page of common expectations. Don't hesitate to add your own thoughts to the list.
- You should know that the middle school is preparing your child for the next level of education.
- You and your child should know at least one adult at school well enough to ask for help.
- You should know that the school encourages your child to develop friendships.
- You should know that the school gives your child opportunities to get involved in activities.
- You should feel that your child has enough good experiences during a day at school to want to return.
- You should feel confident that teachers will keep you informed on your child's progress.



Learning at the Homeport

If a parent is a teacher, too – and by now we hope you realize the two are inseparable – then the reinforcement a middle schooler gets at home is still another key to success at school.

Just being together with a child and talking about a school day is one way to encourage your child's interest in school. Other shared activities – doing homework together, reading some of the same books, talking over subjects and issues that come up in the classroom – can also pay off in higher student achievement.

Is it a coincidence that the characteristics of effective schools and successful families are similar? Hardly. Since schools reflect the values of society, it should be no surprise that the best of family values will show up in the best learning environments.

If you still need convincing that a good parent is a good teacher, too, consider the similarities between them once more. Both successful families and successful schools exhibit:

- strong leadership
- high expectations
- a sense of purpose
- order
- a close, loving eye on progress.

Even if your time is limited, you can encourage your middle-school child to learn by fostering a close relationship at home. Make sure your life at home is orderly, purposeful and positive. Don't overlook the importance of small things and good routines – things like eating meals together or sharing chores.



How Good is Your Own Crew?

An interesting study done among families shows patterns in the homes of high-achievement students. Could your family benefit from one of the ten “Characteristics of Effective Families”?

Effective Families:

1. Enjoy a feeling of control over their lives.
2. Frequently communicate high expectations to children.
3. Share a dream of success for the future.
4. See hard work as a key to success.
5. Share a physically active lifestyle.
6. Set aside 25 to 30 hours of “learning time” per week.
7. Give support and solve problems as a unit.
8. Have clearly understood household rules that are consistently enforced.
9. Communicate frequently with teachers.
10. Emphasize spiritual growth.



Steering Through Homework’s Choppy Waters

Homework is another area where you can help your child, but beware! It can be a real point of conflict in families.

There’s a right and wrong way to help your child get through homework assignments. At times, these assignments may go beyond your own educational level, as your child is preparing for the jobs of tomorrow, not those of yesterday.

Here are some questions to ask your young student. These should help make homework time easier for both of you. When you ask these questions, don’t ask them in a confrontational, condescending or accusatory manner. Use them to demonstrate your support and willingness to help:

- Do you understand what you’re suppose to do? (Ask your child to describe the assignment in his or her own words.)
- Have you read the background material?
- Do you have the directions, or did you leave them at school?
- Have your read the directions? (If you want to help with the assignment, ask your child to read them aloud.)

- Do you have the materials you need to do the work? (A ruler, a calculator, a set of colored pencils, etc.)
- Have you given yourself enough time to finish the assignment?

If you go through this list of questions and your child is still unable to finish a homework assignment, don't lose patience. Try to reorganize and take a new approach with a few other questions:

- How far did you get before you couldn't proceed? (This will help isolate the problem.)
- Did you somehow miss the instructions?
- Should we look up the terms and words you don't understand in a dictionary?
- Should you review a previous assignment before tackling this one?
- Is your answer correct? How can you double-check your work?

Don't hesitate to contact the teacher when a child has constant problems completing homework. He or she can help your child overcome a problem only when the problem isn't hidden.

No matter what age the student, parent-teacher conferences are a good idea, even if your child's performance is good. Since these conferences are usually not regularly scheduled events in middle school, you may have to contact the teacher to request an appointment. These meetings should help keep you aware of progress and problems. Again, a good teacher will welcome a chance to help a student with a word to a parent.

SUCCESSFUL PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE

- Decide whether your child should be with you at the meeting. Let him or her know you're meeting with the teacher.
- Be punctual and have your questions ready.
- Be complimentary and supportive about what's going right. Then talk about the problems.
- Talk about the biggest worries, and put aside the trivial ones. Time may be limited.
- Make notes.
- Be sure your child's teacher can identify your child's strengths and weaknesses.
- If your child is having problems in several subjects, schedule a meeting with all teachers involved.
- Try to solve problems with the meeting; don't just dish out blame.
- Make sure you and the teacher leave the meeting with a clear idea of what is expected to happen next.



Charting a Course for High School and Beyond

As a parent, you want the best for your child's future. Beginning as early as middle school, your child will have the chance to choose subjects to study. Courses are arranged in sequence, each building on the one before, and demanding more of the student.

What your child wants to do after high school will determine the academic courses to take. Planning should begin in the ninth grade or earlier. If you wait until the junior or senior year of high school, you've waited too long. What should my child do in the seventh and eighth grades to be ready to attend college?

1. Your child's ability to read and write is the most important and basic skill needed for the future.
2. Your child needs a firm foundation in math.
3. Your child should take advantage of courses offered in science, social studies, and foreign languages.
4. Your child must learn good study habits and basic school skills. Remember, getting to school on time everyday and completing assignments are habits that are "transferable" to the work place.

WHAT HIGH SCHOOL COURSES WILL BEST PREPARE MY CHILD?

Courses for entering:	Colleges Universities Military Academics	Arts	Vocational & Technical Jobs	Business Careers
English Applied Communications (Emphasis on writing, speaking and organizing information)	4 yrs.	4 yrs.	4 yrs.	4 yrs.
Science Biology Chemistry Physics	2-4 yrs.	1-3 yrs.	1-3 yrs.	1-3 yrs.
Math Algebra Geometry Trigonometry Pre-Calculus Calculus	2-4 yrs.	2-4 yrs.	2-4 yrs.	2-4 yrs.
History	2-4 yrs	2-4 yrs.	2-4 yrs.	2-4 yrs.
Foreign Languages	2-4 yrs.			
Other	Music Art	Music Art	Principles of Technology Applied Physics Electronics	
	Bookkeeping	Dance Drama	Keyboarding/Wordprocessing Sociology Desktop Publishing Psychology Statistics Business Economics Marketing Education	



The Parent as Public School Advocate

What is “school advocacy?” Basically, it means being informed about school activities and staying involved in them. It means helping your child with homework and voting for financial support of schools. It means campaigning for good school board candidates and good school related legislation. It means making sure your child has access to educational technology. If the school is not up to par, it means actively working to improve it.

There are many different levels of school advocacy. The first level is in the classroom. Advocacy here is simple: Get to know your child’s teacher. Be aware of what’s going on in school – stay informed about schoolwork and homework assignments. If you don’t understand something, ask questions. If you encounter education jargon, insist on a clear translation of what it means. Meet the parents of your child’s classmates and encourage them to be informed and involved.

To be a real advocate of good education and your child, you can and should move beyond the walls of the classroom. Try to get involved in the school and in the community. Arrange to visit the school. Get to know other teachers. Observe other classes. Meet with school officials. Learn the school’s policies. Investigate opportunities to volunteer. Help with fund-raising efforts geared toward new computers and technology training for teachers.

If there’s a parents group – a PTA or PTO – at the school, join it. Attend meetings and explore ways you might be able to help. (If there isn’t a group at your school, the national office of the PTA can help you set up a program.) Attend school board meetings, and get to know board members. Stay aware of their voting records and stands on key issues. Campaign and vote for legislation to improve school financing and for legislators who support public education and school reform. Campaign and vote for school board members who have shown they are committed to excellence. Better yet, run for the school board yourself!

Throughout this process, seek out information that will help. Much of it will be readily available for local school officials, school boards, state and local officials. In the case of public school, you have a legal right to school policies, budgets, salaries, test scores, minutes of meetings and other public records. Learn your rights under the law and exercise them as you work for change.

Today, schools are dealing with the middle years in fairly new ways. The approaches may be different than the way you remember. These new ways of dealing with early adolescents reflect knowledge gained about child development over the last 20 years. This knowledge is directing the schools to give youngsters more opportunities to explore new ideas, new curriculum and career possibilities.

Since these approaches might be new to you, it’s okay to ask questions. As parents, we should push our schools to make sure they apply this new knowledge to the best interests of our children.

If the idea of school advocacy seems a little scary, just remember this: The entire community has a stake in the excellence of its schools. A good advocate doesn’t even have to be a parent, or have a child in school. You can encourage others to be informed and involved whether or not you have children.



The Journey's End

As a parent-teacher, you are a fundamental figure in the educational life of your child. You can shoulder that responsibility and help your middle schooler get through some challenging and rewarding years with love and self-esteem. Or you can stand by while your child fights the currents alone.

Why not make sure your child gets the tools to build a successful life? Why not make education one of the pillars of your family life?

As an adult, you know how a life can run through rough spots and hit hidden obstacles. But you can take hope in one thought – a good education will be your child's best friend in life.

By giving your best to the education of your child, your child will get the best education. Adolescence is a time when the body grows and the mind blossoms. The right direction now – your careful direction as a parent – will be invaluable to your child in the years to come.



Resources on the Internet

Educational technology is taking schools by storm. Many teachers have incorporated use of the Internet into their curriculum, providing a staggering number of resources to parents, teachers and children ranging from games to international organizations doing cutting-edge research in educational technology. Following is a list of organizations and Web sites you may want to explore:

BELLSOUTH.net EDUCATION GATEWAY
<http://www.bellsouth.net/K-12>

The BellSouth.netSM Education Gateway contains education-specific, teacher-selected information complete with customized guides to a rich variety of K-12 Internet sites for teachers, students and parents. The Education Gateway focuses on providing easy access to research information, interfaces for worldwide communications and Internet training.

Located in the Gateway's "Center Section," teachers can find links to lesson plans and support for day-to-day class instruction in core subject areas. Students and parents can find links to newspapers, museums, NASA, government agencies and other interesting sites. Additional information sites include library services, quotations, encyclopedias, ERIC Research Service and search engines.

GLOBAL SCHOOLNET FOUNDATION
<http://www.gsn.org/>

This site contains information on The Global School House (GSH), a program that links schools from around the world by videoconference. GSH maintains mailing lists including GlobalWatch, a bulletin board for new projects and events, and SchoolNet, a subscription service of moderated news groups that are free of sexism, racism, violence, and other material inappropriate to elementary school children.

NASA INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE TECHNOLOGY APPLICATIONS
<http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/> (For NASA's Quest Project)
<http://www.aem.umn.edu/other/msgc/k-12.html> (For K-12 Educational Resources)

These sites are exceptionally useful science resources. Hot topics include items such as Shuttle Team Online and Live From Mars.

ICONNECT
<http://www.ala.org/ICONN>

ICONNECT is a technology initiative designed to help students and educators learn through Internet use. The initiative has five components: Online Courses; Curriculum Connections; Mini Grants; Kids Connect; and ICONNECT Web site and Gopher.

CHILDREN ACCESSING CONTROVERSIAL INFORMATION (CACI)
To subscribe, send e-mail request to: caci-request@cygnus.com with a blank subject line and the message *subscribe* in the body of the letter. CACI was created as a discussion group among adults regarding the safety of children on the Internet.



Additional Resources For Parents of Middle Schoolers

SEARCH INSTITUTE

700 South 3rd Street
Suite 210
Minneapolis, MN 55415
(612) 376-8955
Web site: www.search-institute.org

THE HOME AND SCHOOL INSTITUTE

1201 16th Street N.W.
Washington, D.C.
(202) 466-3633
Web site: megaskillshsi.org

THE FAMILY EDUCATION COMPANY

Statler Building, Suite 1215
20 Park Plaza
Boston, Massachusetts 02116
(800) 927-6006
Web site: www.familyeducation.com

BELLSOUTH EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROFESSIONALS

Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi,
North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee
(800) 984-9135

NATIONAL PTA

330 North Wabash Avenue, Suite 2100
Chicago, Illinois 60611-3690
(312) 670-6782
Web site: www.pta.org



Additional Reading

EARLY ADOLESCENCE

Making Sense of Adolescence: How to Parent From the Heart. John Crudele and Richard Erickson, Ph.D. Ligouri, Missouri, 1995.

Preparing for Adolescence. Dr. James Dobson. Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1989.

The How To Book of Teen Self Discovery: Helping Teens Find Balance, Security and Esteem. Dr. Lew Childre. Boulder Creek, California: Planetary Publishing, 1992.

The 10 Most Troublesome Teenage Problems and How to Solve Them. Bauman Lawrence, Ph.D. and Robert Riche. USA: Birch Lane Press Book, Carol Publishing Group, 1997.

PARENTING YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

Parenting Teens with Love and Logic: Preparing Young Adolescents for Responsible Adulthood. Foster Cline, M.D. and Jim Fay. Colorado Springs, Colorado: Pivon Press, 1992.

Parenting Teenagers: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting of Teens. Don Dinkmeyer & Gary McKay. Circle Pines, Minnesota: American Guidance Service, 1990.

Parenting Your Teenager. David Elkind, Ph.D. New York, New York: Ballantine Books, 1993

Adolescence: The Survival Guide for Parents and Teenagers. Elizabeth Fenwick and Dr. Tony Smith. New York, New York, New York: DK Publishing, Inc., 1996.

Parents, Teens & Boundaries: How to Draw the Line. Jane Bluestein, Ph.D. Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, Inc., 1993.

Teenagers! A Bewildered Parents Guide. Elizabeth Caldwell. San Diego, California, 1996.

Keys to Parenting Your Teenager. Dan H. Fontenelle, Ph.D. Hauppauge, New York, New York: Barrons Educational Services, Inc. 1992.

PUBERTY AND SEXUALITY

From Parent to Parent: Talking to Our Kids About AIDS. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Minnesota AIDS Project, 1987. Available from: Minnesota AIDS Project, 2025 Nicollet Avenue South #200, Minneapolis, MN 55404.

The Power of Abstinence. Kristine Napier, M.P.H. New York, New York: Avon Books, 1996.

HELPING YOUNGSTERS WITH DIVORCE, DEATH & REMARRIAGE

Stepfamily Realities: How to Overcome Difficulties and Have a Happy Family. Margaret Newman. Oakland, California : New Harbinger Publication, Inc., 1994.

Parents Are Forever: A Step By Step Guide to Becoming Successful Co-Parents After Divorce. Thomas Shuley Ph.D. Longmont, Colorado: Springboard Publishing, 1995.

Helping Children Survive Divorce: What to Expect and How to Help. Dr. Archibald D. Hart. Dallas, London, Vancouver, Melbourne: Word Publishing, 1996.

Helping Children Cope with Divorce. Edward Teyber. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992.

Difficult Questions Kids Ask (And Are Often too Afraid to Ask) About Divorce. Meg F. Schneider and Joan Zuckerberg, Ph.D. New York, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One: A Guide for Grownups. William C. Kreon, Ph.D. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Free Spirit Publications, 1996.

PREVENTING AND COPING WITH SPECIFIC PROBLEMS

Understanding Your Teenagers Depression, Issues, Insights and Practical Guidance for Parents. Kathleen McCoy, Ph.D. A Perigee Book: New York, New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1994.

Tough Love: How Parents Can Deal with Drug Abuse. Pauline Neff. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996.

A Parents Guide for Suicidal and Depressed Teens. Kate Williams. Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1995.



Additional Reading Offered By Search Institute

TO ORDER, CALL (800) 888-7828

PARENT EDUCATION

What Kids Need to Succeed: Proven Practical Ways to Raise Good Kids. Dr. Peter L. Benson, Judy Galbraith and Pamela Espeland, 1995. (#326).

Building Assets Together: 101 Group Activities for Helping Youth Succeed. Jolene L. Roehlkepartain, 1995. (#333).

The Troubled Journey: A Portrait of 6th-12th Grade Youth. Dr. Peter L. Benson, 1993 (#308).

Living with 10-to 15-year-olds: A Parent Education Curriculum. (#601).

Parenting with a Purpose: A Positive Approach for Raising Confident, Caring Youth. Dean Feldmeyer and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain. (#328).

Starting Out Right: Developmental Assets for Children. Dr. Nancy Leffert, Dr. Peter L. Benson, and Jolene L. Roehlkepartain. (#364).

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Understanding Early Adolescence: A Framework. Dr. John P. Hill, 1980. (#5030).

Adolescents in Need: An Approach for Helping Rural At-Risk Youth. Betty Compton, R.N., John Hughes, and Dr. Jean C. Smith, 1990. (#504).

Youth in Single Parent Families: Risk and Resiliency. Dr. Peter L. Benson and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, 1993. (#510).

Growing Up Adopted: A Portrait of Adolescents and Their Families. Dr. Peter L. Benson, Dr. Anu Sharma, L.P., and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, 1994. (#505).

After School: Young Adolescents on Their Own. Dr. Joan Lipsitz, 1986. (#811).

PREVENTION

Everyone Wins When Youth Serve: How Service-Learning Partnerships Can Strengthen Your Organization's Volunteer Program. Dr. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, 1995. (#551).

Eating Disorders Report. 1996. (#936).

HEALTHY YOUTH

150 Ways to Show Kids You Care. 1996. (#355).

Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth Booklet. 1996. (#351).



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Dorman, Gayle. *School Environment for Young Adolescents: What Parents Should Look For.* Carrboro, N.C.: Center for Early Adolescence, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.

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Farel, Anita M. 1982 *Early Adolescence: What Parents Need to Know.* Carrboro, N.C.: Center for Early Adolescence, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Rich, Dorothy. *The Parents Question and Answer Library.* Washington, D.C.: The Home and School Institute, n.d.