

## **Surviving Middle School: Tips For Parents From A Middle School Counselor**

By Cyndi Francis for American School Counselor Association

With the arrival of springtime come both new beginnings and endings to many cherished times. As your children finish elementary school, you are proud of their accomplishments and look forward to their future successes. But suddenly it dawns on you, they will enter middle school next year – an unfamiliar environment with new teachers and new challenges – and you realize your little one is not so little anymore!

Middle school is a time of many changes, both physically and emotionally. It won't take long for you to discover that, although your children will still need you for many things, they aren't the dependent children you once knew. Middle school students need your help to mature emotionally and intellectually – but they also need freedom. Parents can best help them find their place in life by understanding this exciting stage of development.

### **Physical Development**

This is a time in your child's life where you can expect rapid growth spurts – and get ready for puberty. Other physical changes that will occur include the loss of baby teeth, incomplete bone growth (which may result in injuries), and improved eye-hand coordination. Some tips for encouraging good physical health and surviving puberty include:

- Redirect your child to more suitable activities if their playing becomes too rough.
- Encourage your child to use creative skills in a physical way.
- Educate your child about the bodily changes that will be taking place.
- Consider scheduling a first pelvic examination for daughters.
- Answer questions about sex honestly and in language your child can understand.

### *Body Image*

Many middle school students want to compare their "looks" to others and strive to "fit-in" with their peers by the way they dress. They tend to associate how they "think they look" with how they feel about themselves. Sometimes physical, social or academic problems can develop if they have a poor self-image. Some tips for building a positive body image include:

- Listen to what your children say, and discourage "put-downs" about their appearance.
- Reassure your children that you accept them "as is" – be careful how you suggest changes in dress, hairstyle, etc.

### *Struggle For More Independence*

As your child grows older, he will become more independent and self-reliant. This can often lead to conflicts in the home because at this age, young people begin to rely less on their parents and more on their friends. Some tips for reducing tensions that often occur with this struggle for independence include:

- Be a good listener.
- Set reasonable limits and teach your child how to avoid self-destructive behavior (such as taking drugs).
- Help your child learn to solve problems rather than relying on others for solutions.
- Provide privacy and freedom – when it is deserved.

## **Emotional Development**

This is generally an age when your children are going to want to “fit in” with their peers and will seek the opinions of friends more often than the opinion of parents.

Middle school children fear social rejection and may become overly critical of others because of insecurity about themselves. Their conscience begins to develop and they also become fairly responsible for themselves. To promote good emotional health:

- Help our children develop a positive self-image by showing them your love, respect and acceptance.
- Spend time with your child when possible – but don’t force the issue.
- Encourage friendships based on mutual acceptance (this will help your child to learn to resist peer pressure).
- Reassure them that different rates of physical growth are normal.
- Seek professional help if your children do not seem to be able to cope with their problems.
- Know your child’s friends.

## **Mental Development**

Middle school students begin to think more abstractly and begin to understand more than one viewpoint. They are able to complete more long-term assignments and are able to handle more homework. To help your child develop mental skills:

- Help your child structure time to work and play if he is faced with new academic demands and monitoring the completion of assignments.
- Work together with your child’s teachers and school.
- Contact your child’s physician or teacher if you suspect he has a learning problem.

## **About Discipline**

Disciplining a middle school child, can be especially challenging for parents. Children at this age are caught between childhood and adulthood. They are expected to act more maturely, but they still sometimes like to be treated as a child. They are likely to get into trouble as they seek greater independence and it is up to the parent to decide what rules are in the child’s best interest. Some tips for disciplining a middle school child include:

- Establish clear, fair rules (stick to basics) and be consistent about using them.
- Discuss any problems or intended consequences first, then explain why you’re displeased and listen to your child’s side of the story.
- Use consequences as a tool to teach self-control and responsibility – try to make it meaningful and appropriate to the offense.
- Instead of spanking your child, deny a privilege or limit freedoms for a certain length of time.

You and your child can enjoy these middle school years if you:

- Help build a sense of self-confidence.
- Understand your child’s need to spend time with friends.
- Stay firm but flexible when necessary.
- And most importantly, keep the lines of communication open!