

Not Quite Little Kid, Not Quite Teenager

The Developmental Progression of The Middle School Child

Winnetka Parent Institute
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Introductions

Dr. Andrew Fenton, *Carleton Washburne School Principal*

Major Pratt Junior High in Russell, MB

Mrs. Betty Weir, *The Skokie School Principal*

Shepherd Junior High School in Deerfield, IL

Mr. Ben Horwitz, *Carleton Washburne Assistant Principal*

Lincoln Hall Middle School in Lincolnwood, IL

Mr. Larry Joynt, *The Skokie School Assistant Principal*

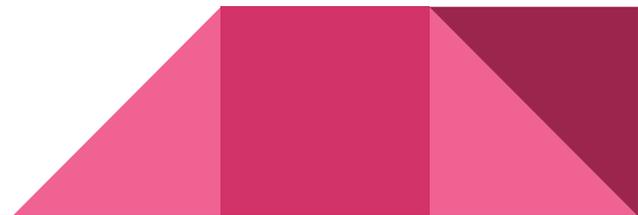
St. John's Lutheran School in Country Club Hills, IL



Turn and Talk...

Take a moment to introduce yourself to those at your table, and share the following with each other:

- What was it about today's topic that motivated you to join us?
- What do you remember about your experience as a middle schooler?



There's brain science involved...

Two greatest ranges of brain growth:

- **ages 1-5 AND adolescence** (ages 10-25, depending on each child)

What does that mean?

- Entering an era of intense change, and prime opportunity for adversity
- Intense change of this kind comes with intense physiological changes:

Emotional
Hormonal
Biological

Social Awareness
Self-Awareness



Young Brains are Different...

- Nurture is 2x more likely to have an impact on student learning and development
- “Flashes of Mature followed by flashes of Immature” = *How the young brain works*
- Current research points to brains not being fully developed until age 25
- 300% decrease in risky behavior at age 25
(insurance companies known this for years)
- When young brain is stressed → **“ACT OUT”** or **“ZONE OUT”**
- *Environment influences feelings and feelings influence behavior*



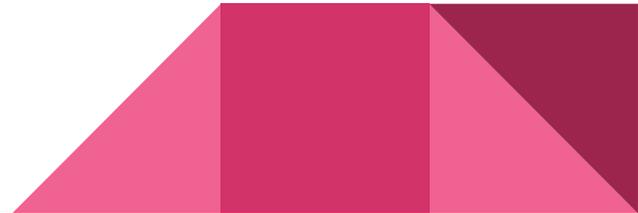
Brain growth means biological needs...

Hormonal growth and emotional instability

High Metabolic Rate and Sugar Consumption

High Brain Plasticity = Incredible ability to absorb knowledge (both positive and negative)

Aroused Dopamine + Developing Prefrontal Cortex = **High Risk Taker**



Turn and Talk: What are the phrases you hear used at home...

“I’m bored...”

“I don’t like school anymore...”

“It’s not a big deal....”

“You don’t get it...”

“Everyone else is doing it...”



What does it mean?

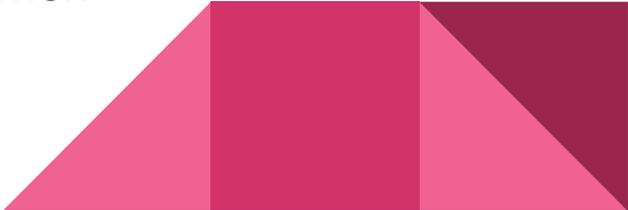
“I’m bored...”--the middle school brain is capable of seven to seventeen minutes of sustained attention to one topic

“I don’t like school anymore...”---something is challenging, which can often bring on anxiety, heightened hormone levels contribute to inability to self-regulate emotion, anxiety, stress, etc.

“It’s not a big deal....”---it might be a big deal; be aware of what, who, where

“You don’t get it....” ---highly self-centered portion of life (much like ages 1-5) that can limit ability to see or accept other perspectives when emotions and hormones run so high

“Everyone else is doing it...” ---need to feel accepted





“Early adolescence is about the child adapting to the world, rather than the world adapting to the child.”

Social Dynamics

- Middle school brings increased social opportunities
- Friends change
- Middle schoolers are more likely to take risks when with friends
- Awareness of social hierarchy
- Self-centeredness is expected

[Denworth, L. "The Outsize Influence of Your Middle School Friends." *The Atlantic*.](#)



Turn and Talk...

What did you notice about your child's friendships upon entering middle school?

If your child is still in elementary school, what have you noticed about your child's shifting friendships through the years?



Social Dynamics (continued)

High need to be accepted and a desire to fit in:

- Clothing
- Desire to not be seen with parents... independence
- Desire to no longer be associated with childhood toys, television, events, etc.
- Increased comparisons to peers
- “Fear of Missing Out” - Home, sports, other teams/classrooms
- Attention shifts from family to peers
- Technological use/connectivity
 - Cell Phones
 - Social Media



... And Physical Changes Too

Physiological changes in height, weight, body composition, and biological characteristics of gender

Age ranges for onset of puberty

Males grow muscles faster than females; females see an increase in body fat

Different rates for different parts of the body

Differences between early maturers and late maturers



Identity, Relationships, Expressing Gender

Natural time to question, inquire---ties to desire for social acceptance

Entering totally new window of time in their lives when social factors influence everything, more than any other factor (family, school, health, etc.)



Even the Changes Change

Shifts that Occur From Early Adolescence to Late Adolescence:

Early

Family to friends

Same gender peer groups

Desire to conform

Late

More one-to-one

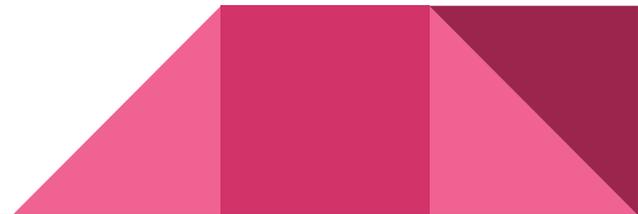
Gender-mixed peer groups

Less conformity/more tolerance



Don't worry, it's normal...

- These are behaviors we expect to see in our students.
- As upper elementary and middle school educators, we are prepared to problem solve through the challenges that come with development at these ages.
- As a parent, experiencing only one middle school student, these challenges may seem daunting, scary, and entirely unique.



What do we do as Middle Schools to address these needs...

- Graduation of Schedule model from 5th to 8th grade
 - Moves from elementary model to junior high model
 - Advisory
 - Provides students with a “homebase”
 - Celebrate Mistakes as much as Success
 - Learn by doing, failing, growing, THEN succeeding
 - Establish Clear Guidelines
 - Define options and limits
 - Involve students in the creation
 - Understand (and explain) the reason for processes
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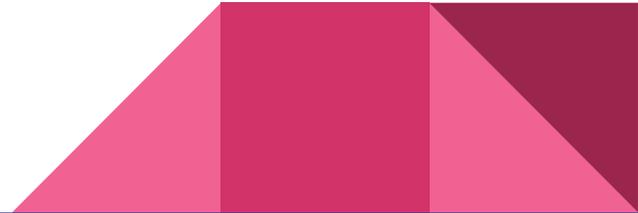
How can parents of Middle Schoolers appropriately prioritize their role?

- Listen more than you contribute at times
 - Wait time for input
- Let them make mistakes
- Genuine praise with meaningful content
- Grant independence in stages
- Avoid temptation to negotiate or moderate all challenges
- Adolescents feed off of the energy that surrounds them, if you're anxious, they will be anxious
- Adolescents are as needy of parental support as they were ages 1-5, best support is nurturing, stable, calm home
- Avoid confluence of role as educator, facilitator, mediator---stick to parent, safe place to come to

Thank you for joining us today!

Share out:

- What are some strategies you use at home that you feel are successful?
- What did you learn today that surprised you?



Social Dynamics

Self-centeredness is not a derogatory term in this instance (narcissism), but rather a matter of science.

Children have a tendency to believe others experience the world exactly as they do (Piaget). It can be difficult for them to separate objectivity and subjectivity.

Between ages 10-12, most children will experience advanced development of their metacognitive state. This includes an awareness of one's own thinking and a heightened awareness of what others think about them.

How might this manifest itself?

