

Not Quite A Little Kid, Not Quite A Teenager

The Developmental Progression of The Middle School Child

Winnetka Parent Institute
Thursday, January 12th, 2023

Introductions

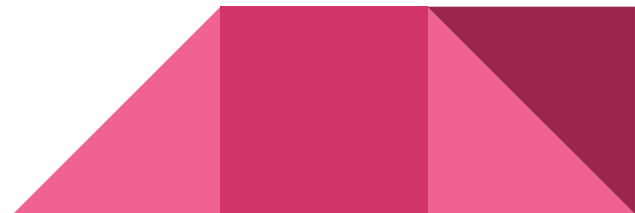
Dr. Andrew Fenton, *Carleton Washburne School Principal*

Major Pratt Junior High in Russell, MB



Mr. Ben Horwitz, *Carleton Washburne Assistant Principal*

Lincoln Hall Middle School in Lincolnwood, IL



Introductions

Ms. Michelle Cooney, *The Skokie School Principal*

Nether Providence Middle School, Wallingford, PA



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?

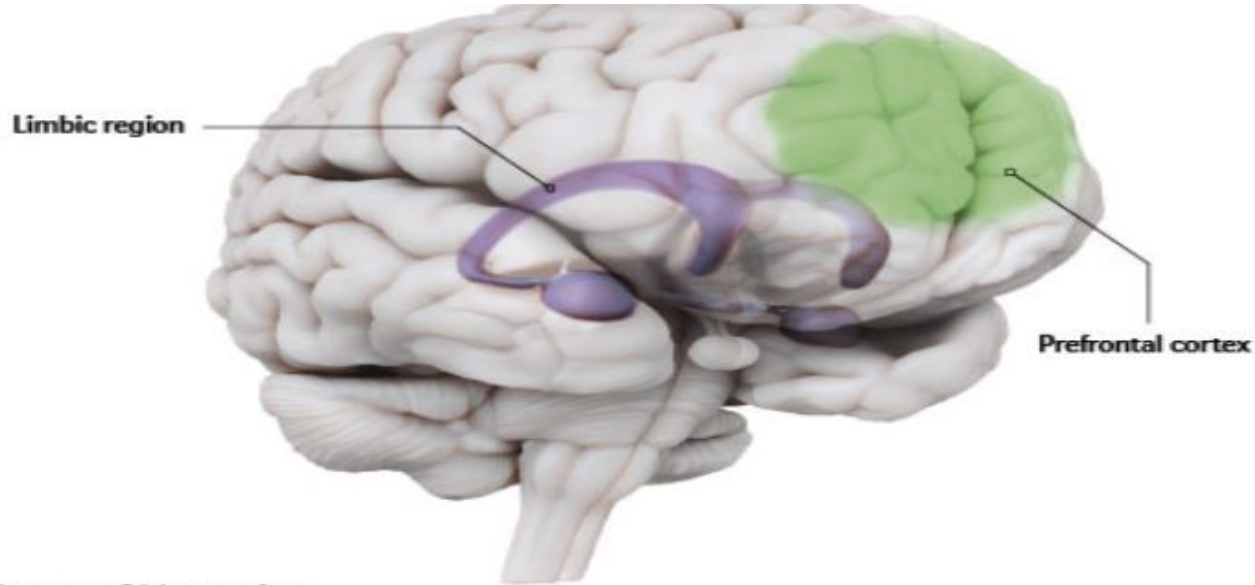
- Entering an era of intense change, and prime opportunity for adversity
- Intense change of this kind comes with intense physiological changes:

Emotional
Hormonal
Biological

Social Awareness
Self-Awareness

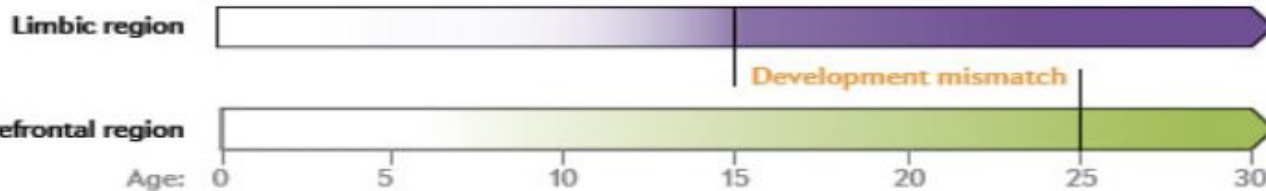


Emotion vs. Control



Increase in risky behavior in part due to a mismatch of two major brain regions.

Degree of Maturation



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*



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..."

MY TEEN REALLY LIKES ME UNLESS
GROWN AND FLOWN
I ASK HER TO DO ANYTHING, GIVE HER
ADVICE OF ANY KIND, SAY THE WRONG
THING, DO THE WRONG THING,
OR BREATHE THE WRONG WAY.



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



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*.](#)

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



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?



... And Physical Changes Too

- Physiological changes in height, weight, body composition, and biological characteristics of gender
- Age ranges for onset of puberty
- Physical maturity \neq emotional maturity
- Need more rest since so much energy is being used for growing
- 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



COVID Impact

Students spent more time with their families than peers.

- Fewer social interactions
- Potential for missed social milestones
- Needed to relearn how to be around peers



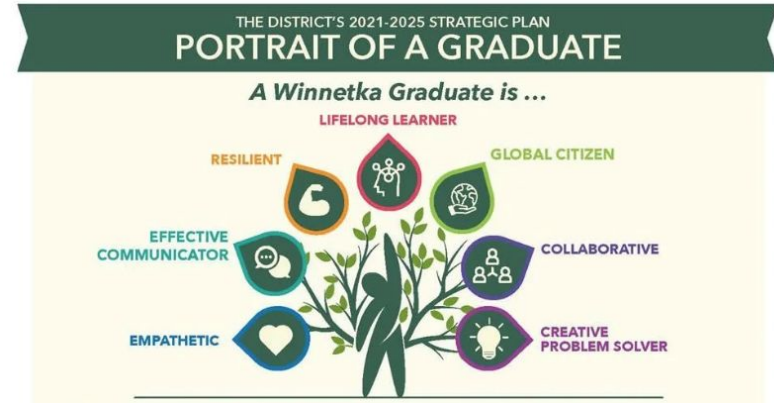
Don't worry, it's normal...

- 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
 - Elementary model to middle school model
- Advisory & SEL
 - Provides students with a “homebase”
 - RULER
- Celebrate Mistakes as much as Success
 - Learn by doing, failing, growing, THEN succeeding - RESILIENCE!
- Establish Clear Guidelines
 - Define options and limits
 - Involve students in the creation
 - Explain the reason for processes




Managing Anxiety

- Adolescents feed off of the energy that surrounds them.
 - Anxiety is contagious; anxiety and panic are caused by fear and uncertainty.
 - Perfectionism can lead to procrastination, a fixed mindset, and harsh self-critics.
 - The rational thinking part of our brain goes offline when we panic.
 - Hearing changes when you're in stress; attending is not a choice, it's a response.
 - The good news: your nervous system rinses clean of negative thoughts in 90 seconds and any remaining emotional response is a choice to stay in that emotional loop; 90 seconds of focused attention can help you regulate.
- Anxiety and stress can actually be good for you...



Good Anxiety

- There is no growth in the absence of stress.
 - Enjoy the superpowers of anxiety:
 - Productivity: turning what-ifs into to-dos
 - Flow: embrace moments when everything is going right and you're focused
 - Empathy: knowing what anxiety feels like helps us empathize with others
 - Focus on emotional regulation and balance emotional expression and containment (ability to hold it together)
 - All feelings are okay. What's important is how we manage those feelings.
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Good Anxiety

- Anxiety can be good for you and can help us prepare for things and respond to emergencies, provided you have strategies to turn it down, such as:
 - Meditation/breathwork
 - Power of mindset
 - Exercise
 - Immediate and long term positive effects of movement on the brain
 - Increases positive mood
 - Improved focus/attention
 - Improved reaction time
 - Improved memory
 - Decreases anxiety, depression, anxiety in as little as 10 minutes



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
 - Avoid temptation to negotiate or moderate all challenges
- Genuine praise with meaningful content
- Grant independence in stages



How can parents of Middle Schoolers appropriately prioritize their role?

- Adolescents are as needy of parental support as they were at ages 1-5, best support is nurturing, stable, calm home.
- Recognizing our own emotional response
- Avoid confluence of role as educator, facilitator, mediator---stick to parent, safe place to come to.



Thank you for joining us today!

Questions?

- What are some strategies you use at home that you feel are successful?
 - What did you learn today that surprised you?
 - Please use the note cards provided to share suggestions and feedback for future Parent events.
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