

The middle school years

What parents need to know

Middle school. A time when the young child you knew so well is suddenly morphing in to someone else – a 'tween (soon to be teen). It's a time of transition for both the student and the parents.

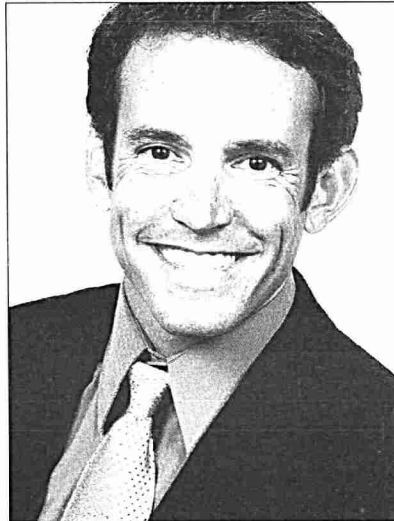
The Parent Paper tackled the topic with Joe Bruzzese, M.A., author of the Parent's Guide to the Middle School Years, in an e-mail Q&A. Bruzzese is both an author and speaker who connects parents and educators with strategies for thriving during the middle school years. For more information, check his Web site: www.Thinking-ForwardTV.com.

Question: What is the main difference between elementary school and middle school?

Answer: Slimming down the differences to a single statement would prove to be a difficult task. If asked to name one, though, I would say continuity. The elementary school day flows in a smooth, familiar way. Children move from one subject to the next, often without leaving their classrooms. A familiar face greets them in the morning, answers questions and helps to solve problems. The elementary school teacher is truly a jack-of-all-trades.

Middle school creates a series of new rhythms that require children to continually readjust their expectations and behaviors to meet the changing demands of classrooms, teachers and peers. A trip to the local middle school campus will likely find hundreds of kids shuttling books from class to class in oversized backpacks while trying to share short but meaningful conversations with friends in the span of a four-minute passing period. Life beyond the academic day also lacks the continuity of a typical elementary school day.

Friendships encompass the minutes (and hours) that fill the time between extracurricular activities and nightly homework assignments. A full slate of afternoon and evening activities can keep a middle schooler busy until the late evening hours, a trend



Author Joe Bruzzese

that is leading many kids toward a potentially sleep-deprived day. Waking up with an adolescent in your home can be challenging enough for parents after a full night's rest; the thought of cutting into the rejuvenating hours doesn't result in an enjoyable morning routine for anyone.

Question: What should parents know about middle school students?

Answer: Independence trumps logic and reason. The drive to establish an identity and separate from their parents drives middle schoolers to make decisions that often contradict years of parenting guidance. The child who heads to the mall with friends

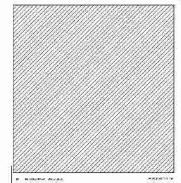
for an afternoon of fun, knowing that Mom and Dad won't approve, is essentially saying, "I'm old enough to make my own decisions about how I choose to spend my time." Drugs and alcohol find their way into the lives of children during the middle school years, often in response to a child's desire to create an identity that is radically different from what he sees at home. Giving your child the opportunity to make choices and experience the consequences of those choices can lead to developing a healthy sense of independence. Short of choices that put a child in physical danger, I coach parents to give their children a wide variety of opportunities to make choices that result in both positive and negative consequences. At 12 or 13, the consequences of most choices pale in comparison to those of a 21-year-old. Yet, when kids are not given the freedom to choose at a younger age, their capacity to make decisions later in life is diminished.

Question: Aren't middle school students still young kids?

Answer: In many ways yes, middle school students come to the classroom every day without the wisdom of their high school counterparts. Conversations about friendships, after-school sports and the 5th period math test still hold a significant spot in the minds of most middle school students. Yet, romance and the sudden realization that someone may have noticed the developing pimple behind your right ear can trigger a cataclysmic series of events leading to a day of middle school drama. Without the knowledge that life can and will be different the following day, middle school students tend to get stuck in the minutia of today.

Question: How can parents best handle the peer pressures their children encounter?

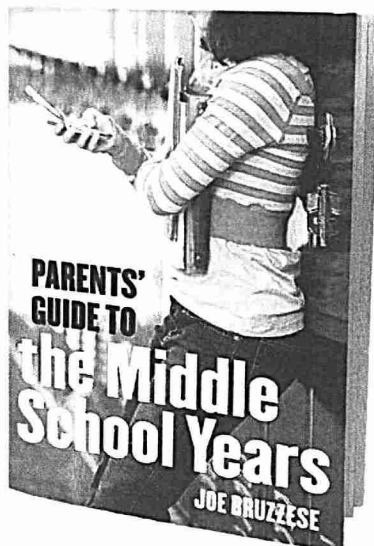
Answer: The best coaching comes from former



middle school students when they say, "Be yourself." The challenge for parents is to find environments outside the school day where their children can thrive in the presence of peers who share similar interests and an attitude that recognizes individuality. The school day presents quite the opposite experience for most kids. Individuality receives little recognition. Finding a group, adhering to their norms and fitting in, holds a much higher place on the list of middle school priorities. Aside from the normal banter among friends, middle school students can find themselves face-to-face with serious decisions. Declining a friend's offer to drink a beer or smoke pot is easy for adults to promote, but in the absence of experience, saying "no" doesn't work for most kids. Role playing difficult situations, like those involving drugs, alcohol and bullying, improves a child's ability to make choices that result in a healthy life. Looking for opportunities throughout the school year to role play difficult situations with your children, dramatically improves their decision-making ability.

Question: Are there ways for parents to be aware of problems that their children aren't willing to talk about?

Answer: One of the top strategies I share with parents, whether I'm working one-on-one at a family's home or in front of group at a school event, is the idea of a T.E.A.M. I use the acronym to clearly define the group of people who teach, encourage, advocate for and motivate their children. As children become more independent and less willing to talk with their parents, the TEAM becomes more important. Establishing a relationship with each



member of a child's support team gives parents a series of points for staying connected with their child's life.

Question: What is the best thing a parent can do for a middle school student?

Answer: Listen and wait. A mom called me a few weeks ago to share her joy over a recent conversation she had with her son (a rarity for these two). Attempts at conversation in the past had been met with little or no response from her son, often amounting to little more than a mono-syllabic utterance. Frustration grew on both sides of the

Q&A

relationship. Mom felt shut out and her son wanted to keep it that way. I encouraged Mom to wait and listen for a time when her son seemed excited by a recent event. In this case, her son had finished a hard soccer workout with the team and was excited to talk about his teammates, the coach and the challenge of competing on the field. After a few minutes of listening, Mom joined the conversation with a few questions: "How did your coach know where to position the players?" and "How did you score with only two players?" The conversation continued to flow for the entire 45-minute trip home. By giving her son the opportunity to talk about a topic of interest, he was willing to engage and answer questions. Often parents ask questions with the intent of gathering snippets of information about the day's events. Peppering a child with a game of 20 questions gets old, particularly for middle schoolers.

Question: What is the worst thing a parent can do for a middle school student?

Answer: Pushing past the point of a child's interest. Children naturally pursue activities and interests they enjoy, seeking to engage in something that both challenges and inspires their curiosity. Pushing a child toward activities that a parent enjoys or perhaps missed themselves during the childhood years, is a recipe for disaster. Eventually, children become resentful of their parents' personal desires and seek recognition from a group that values their individuality. Giving children the opportunity to experiment with activities, while gently guiding them toward areas of natural ability or interest, results in a happy child. ■

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