



# Help, I've Got a Middle Schooler!

*A Practical  
Guide for Families  
by Susan Quattrocioni, Ph.D.*

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*You are what you  
take the time to become.*

—JOSEPH STEIN, PHILOSOPHER



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# Table of Contents

6

*The Marvelous Middle School Years*

11

*Discovering Your  
Middle Schooler's Abilities*

21

*Making Sense of Middle School*

28

*Making the Most  
of Middle School for Your Child*

35

*Appendix 1: Find Your Strengths*

36

*Appendix 2: Finding Flow*

37

*Recommended Reading*

39

*Notes*

40

*About the Author*

*The best predictor  
of the behavior of young people  
is the behavior of the adults around them.*

—MIKE MALES, *THE SCAPEGOAT GENERATION*

Dear Parents,

Two words strike fear into parents' hearts—middle school.

Why? Because the middle school years are a time of incredible biological, emotional, intellectual, and social change for kids. That's a lot of change to handle in three years, so no wonder you—and they—are nervous!

Looking ahead, some of you may fear your sweet and eager-to-please elementary school child will suddenly turn into a moody, belligerent preteen. Others of you dread your child's going from the small and friendly environment of the elementary school to the larger and more intimidating middle school.

The middle school years can be a challenge, and the transition from elementary school may be difficult for you and/or your child, but remember, these years are also a wonderful time of discovery for young people. Given those realities, how can you help your child capture the best—and minimize the pitfalls—of the middle school years?

First, become aware of all the developmental changes your child will be going through in the next several years. Children between the ages of 11 and 14 experience more physical, intellectual, and emotional changes than at any other time in their lives other than from birth to age three!

Second, come to understand the uniqueness of your child. What are his or her inborn talents, interests, and skills, and how can you help your child pursue those unique talents, interests, and skills in your community?

Third, learn how middle school is different from elementary school and how you can prepare your child for the transition.

Finally, don't assume that the "heavy lifting" portion of your child-rearing years is over. Your child still needs you. Look for ways to become involved in your child's school, and help him or her take full advantage of the middle school years.

The overall message of this booklet is that young adolescents are not frightening—they are curious, creative, and social beings who still need lots of love from you and other caring adults. You can help them by staying connected with them, the teachers and staff of their middle school, and the community at large in a positive way.

Relax. Trust and love your middle schooler—and enjoy the ride!

*Susan Quattrociochi*

Susan Quattrociochi, Ph.D.



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# The Marvelous Middle School Years

What's the first thing you think of when you think about middle schoolers? Rapidly changing bodies? Changing moods? Changing habits? All three—and more?

Yep, when kids hit middle school, a lot of changes are going on in their bodies, minds, and emotions. Middle schoolers may become bigger and more awkward, more curious and creative, more social, and more critical—of themselves and others; and they are often moodier—happier, sadder, more excited, or more despondent.

Oh, and have you noticed they don't spend as much time with you as they used to?

Two educators explain “middlers” this way<sup>1</sup>:

They eat all the time.

They frequently exclaim, “You don't understand.”

They cry a lot.

They laugh a lot.

They like hanging out at home and being with their parents.

They hate hanging out at home or being seen with their parents.

They can't pay attention for more than a minute at a time.

They outgrow their shoes every few months.

They are seldom satisfied with the way they look.

They are loyal to their friends.

They talk behind their friends' backs.

They want to be independent.

They don't want to let go of their childhood.

Sound about right?

As you know, even that list doesn't cover all the many “faces” of a middle schooler—for example, many parents remark that their middle schoolers spend much of their day “looking in the mirror”! Let's face it, no list can sum up the complexity of your child, who is, after all, unique. But it is a fact that all children between the ages of 11 and 14 go through more physical, intellectual, and emotional changes than at any other time in their lives except for the years from birth to three.

It's not so surprising then, is it, that they spend a lot of time looking in the mirror to see if they are “normal”? Wouldn't you, if in a two-to four-year period you grew 10 to 20 inches, your hands and feet outgrew the rest of your body, and your bones hurt all the time from growth spurts and the final fusing of your tailbone? Wouldn't you

*“When it comes to  
dealing with middle school  
kids, parents should listen  
at least three times more  
than they talk.”*

—PAM SOWELL,  
MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSELOR

wonder what's normal if your voice suddenly changed or your chest "sprouted" breasts, hair started to grow where once you were bare, and changes in your hormones made you hyperactive and sweaty one minute and overwhelmed with fatigue the next?

Are middle schoolers difficult to deal with at times as a result of all these changes? You bet! So, be glad they're not happening to you, and bring lots of understanding, tons of humor, and loads of compassion to the table every morning. Keep telling yourself, "This is just a stage, this is just a stage"—because it is. The rapid hormonal and physical changes your child is going through may make her or him overly sensitive and terribly self-conscious, but the important fact to remember is that this is just a short stage in the overall life of a wonderful person.

### *Adolescence is more than just pimples*

In addition to all the obvious physical and emotional changes, your child faces developmental tasks. If these tasks are accomplished, experts say, your child will make a successful transition into adulthood.

The Harvard School of Public Health's Project on the Parenting of Adolescents identified the following as the 10 main tasks of adolescents.<sup>2</sup>

1. Adjusting to sexually maturing bodies.
2. Developing and applying abstract thinking—to think about possibilities or test out different ways of solving a problem.
3. Acquiring the ability to understand human relationships—to put themselves in another person's shoes.
4. Developing new skills in decision making, problem solving, and conflict resolution.
5. Identifying moral standards, values, and belief systems.
6. Understanding and expressing more complicated emotions.
7. Forming friendships that are close and supportive.
8. Establishing key parts of their personal identity.
9. Taking on increasingly mature roles and responsibilities.
10. Renegotiating relationships with parents—balancing independence with ongoing connection.

Aren't you glad you don't have to learn all this in the next five years? Preteens and teens have a big job on their hands. They need your love, patience, and guidance now more than ever. As the Harvard School of Public Health researchers emphasize, "Most things in their lives are changing; don't let your love be one of them."



*"To me middle school is different, it's higher grades and different people, but it's OK to me . . . it's big and wide."*

*"TRANSITION TO A MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOL: WHAT KIDS SAY" (1992)*



### *Just like us!*

Don't fall into the trap of thinking that preteens and teens are more difficult than the rest of us. Middlers and teens are getting a terrible rap, according to Mike Males, author of *The Scapegoat Generation*. Males points out that children are no more violent, drugged, criminal, or sexually active than we are, and in fact, every statistic about teens "mirrors that of the adults in their era and community." In other words, "teens act just like we do," he says, adding, "Maybe that's why we're so mad at them."

## **What adolescents really want and need**

Parents may ask, "My kid seems so unhappy much of the time. How do I know if he is doing OK?" Good question and a vital distinction—don't confuse mood with well-being.

In the fascinating book *Being Adolescent*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson record a day-by-day, minute-to-minute picture of a young person's moods. While it's true that adolescents' moods swing, when viewed over time, teens move right along, sort of on schedule, from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood.

Rather than worrying about whether your child is happy or unhappy from minute to minute, day to day, concentrate on the concept of thriving. Is she generally well off? Is he healthy, keeping up at school, and learning something he's really interested in at home? Is she making friends? Is he developing as a person, a student, and a family and community member?

And whatever you do, don't think your middle schooler doesn't need you as much as she or he did as a youngster. If anything, middle schoolers need their families more! They want a different kind of relationship with you, one with more maturity and independence, but they want as much time and attention from you as before.

Virtually all the experts on adolescence make the case for a different kind of parenting rather than less parenting. In short, they say, "Loosen up, but don't let go."

Kids themselves are clear about wanting lots of time and attention from their parents. When a national survey asked teens what one message they would like to send adults, it was a simple plea: "Please talk to us!"

## **Kids are people, too**

Actually, we spend so much time worrying about who our kids will turn into as teens that we forget the most important point: they are people just like us. They want what we want—to be loved, to be noticed, to be heard, to be respected, and to be able to make a contribution at home and at school and be recognized for it.

Pre-adolescents and teens still crave what they craved as children and will need as adults: love, attention, good feedback, direction, someone who listens to them, and time to relax together. The same things, in fact, that all of us need.

Edward Deci and Richard Flaste, authors of *Why We Do What We Do*, summarize the basic needs of all human beings as the three C's<sup>3</sup>:

- **Connection**—to people and community.
- **Choices**—the ability to choose among a variety of options.
- **Competency**—being recognized for doing good work.

And to achieve competency, middle schoolers need the three R's<sup>4</sup>:

- **Real roles**—useful tasks to express idealistic, creative, and constructive interests.
- **Real responsibilities**—useful activities others depend on.
- **Real risks**—real-life situations that provide them with opportunities to grow.

The best thing you can do as a parent at this stage in your child's life is to be sure your middle schooler gets healthy doses of the three C's, and to help him or her take on the three R's. Work with your child to discover what he or she loves to do, find out how those interests can be used in your community, and then be ready to applaud your child's efforts.

In the end, you and your child will make it through middle school and high school just fine. You'll come out sane, and your child will have made the transition from dependence to independence—from childhood to adulthood.



*"Parents need to understand that if they don't have fun with their kids, their kids won't want to hang around with them. Kids are already pushing away by seventh grade, so it's critical parents not make them push away even farther and faster. Parents who provide a little fun—something as simple as jokes around the dinner table—are the parents whose kids will want to be close to them."*

—JO CRIPPS,  
MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER

## *Are you paying attention?*

**1** According to a recent *New York Times* poll, children spent on the average of how many hours a day with their parents?

**2** According to a University of Michigan poll, mothers spent how much time a day in conversation—not criticizing or giving commands—with their children?

**3** According to the University of Michigan poll, how much time did fathers spend on weekdays in conversation—not criticizing or giving commands—with their children?

**4** What percentage of 9- to 11-year-olds considered being part of a loving family to be much more important than owning material things?

**5** What percentage of 9- to 11-year-olds said their family was their greatest source of self-esteem?

*(Answers are on page 39.)*



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Four years ago, I met with high school parents to talk about the high school–college–career connection. I was concerned about the high costs and high risks of attending college. Although more young people attend college than ever before, more than 50 percent drop out before graduating. Just as discouraging, many who graduate are clueless about what to do with their new degrees and end up back home with less than college-level jobs.

I knew from looking at the research that much of this waste and heartache could be eliminated if students went to college with strong academic skills, a clear career focus based on their talents and interests, and the discipline, drive, and passion needed to complete their dreams.

Parents loved the information, but were angry that it was being given so late in their children’s schooling. “Senior year is no time to learn the six steps to help your child find their focus,” several mothers complained. “These things need to be discussed in middle school!” Another parent said, “We have a son in his second year of college who is struggling, a daughter just out of high school who is undecided about what to do next, and a child in seventh grade. This time we’re going to do it right!”

By “right,” he meant turning educational planning on its head—that is, instead of making education and college the goal, making education the means to achieving his child’s goal. Instead of starting with an idea of where his daughter will go to college, starting with an idea of what kind of person his daughter is and what kind of educational experiences are best for her.

If we make college the goal, even young adults with expensive college degrees end up saying that it feels horrible not to know who they are or where they fit in the world. That is why the best gift parents can give their children is to help them, as theologian Frederick Buechner advises, “find the place where their deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.”

I learned from talking to both parents and teachers that middle school is the right time to begin to focus on children’s talents, interests, and skills. Pre-adolescents are just beginning to question their own meaning and purpose. Many of them are starting to think about education after high school and what kind of life they would like to lead. And, since middle school is the first time they get to choose classes and to use writing, research, and science projects to learn more about their interests, the more they know about those interests, the better.

## Discovering Your Middle Schooler’s Abilities

*“Find the place where  
their deep gladness  
meets the world’s deep need.”*

—FREDERICK BUECHNER, THEOLOGIAN



*"Dear Susan Q: I love children and have really always wanted to work in a field that deals with bettering the future of our children. I came across the PBS home page that mentioned your name, so I thought I would write to you and ask if you have any suggestions for me about where to begin. Thank you."*  
—SHAWNA

## **What am I good at? Where do I fit in life?**

Believe it or not, the question of where their talents lay and how to develop those talents looms large for older middle school students.

A few years ago, I worked on an interactive career project for teens posted on the website of the Public Broadcasting System. That project resulted in more than 4,000 e-mail messages from teens to my electronic "mailbox." Most were from middle schoolers who wanted to know:

- Can you help me figure out what I would be good at?
- Do you know how I can learn where I might fit in life?
- Are there tests I can take to know what I can do really well?
- Can you help me get into your world so that I can see how it works?
- Why don't you help us get started?
- Can you tell me where to go, or who I can talk to?

### **YOU'RE THE HELP THEY NEED!**

Yes, I can tell those middle schoolers where to go and with whom to talk. I would send them back to *you*, their parents, the people who know them best. Why? It's simple, because . . .

- *You* are in the best position to help them identify their inborn talents and their strongest skills.
- *You* are the ones who can guide them into classes and activities that interest them and make them feel as if they are getting somewhere.
- *You* are the ones who can help them find useful connections in the community.
- And, best yet, *you* are the ones who can help them find mentors in the areas that interest them, and mentors are magic for teens!

"Me?" you may be asking yourself. "I'm not a career counselor. Isn't my job just to raise my child and help her do well in school? Aren't the schools doing the career counseling?"

To answer that last question, yes, schools do provide some career counseling, but they have limited time and resources to do it. Furthermore, reports on who influences teens' career choices place parents—not career counselors—at the top of the list! Yep, first! So, use your school to become informed about and to ask for advice on matching your child's interests with classes and community activities and future careers.

If you don't do it, chances are, no one will. Research on the ambitions of American students compared to their college and career success found that "few adults were helping children draw meaningful connections between their interests, educational credentials and future work opportunities." In sum, the researchers found that "the schools think the parents are doing it and the parents think the schools are doing it—and all too often, no one is doing it."<sup>5</sup>

Before you say, "I don't have the experience or expertise to advise my child," you might want to consider that you already started your role as career counselor a long time ago.

Children's habits and interests as well as their outlook about life's possibilities develop in early childhood. By providing a loving and supportive family that offers both encouragement and reasonable expectations, you have nurtured a child who is most likely positive, active, and hopeful, a child who enjoys what he or she does and works hard to achieve a goal—whether that's to be a very good sax player, turn in the best science project, make the track team, build the best computer, act in a play, or rebuild a car.

You've followed your instincts up to now, watching what your child enjoys and suggesting games, toys, and activities to develop his or her interests. Well, keep watching, because both brain researchers and career counselors believe we are born with our talents and major skills and start acting on them as young children. That's why career counselors start their \$85-an-hour sessions with the question: "What did you enjoy doing the most as a child?"

### *Born that way*

Parents of middle schoolers need not worry that their children will be forced to choose a career path too early. When we discover what our children enjoy and help them pursue those interests and talents, we are letting them choose. And yes, they'll change their minds, just as we do as adults. However, the changes we make are usually in how we express our inborn talents as we gain new skills and knowledge.

My daughter Diane, for example, is a born teacher. She may switch from teaching children to teaching adults, or teaching crafts to teaching about teaching, but one thing for sure, she'll continue teaching, just as she did as a child. Daughter Therese, on the other hand, was born to be a scientist and a researcher and continues to be one, even while switching from lab work to grant development in the sciences. Sons Paul and David both displayed mechanical ability early on. One now handles high-tech equipment for a living; the other repairs things for family and friends on weekends, just for the love of it.

### *Parents make a difference!*

Four factors that parents control explain 88% of the difference in student math scores and 91% of the difference in reading scores:

- 1 A child's attendance record at school
- 2 The variety of reading materials in the child's home
- 3 The amount of TV the child watches
- 4 The amount of time parents read to their child

*A NEW GENERATION OF EVIDENCE*  
(1995)



*The human brain has an astonishing capacity for creative power which is built into our genes, ready to unfold. Our innate capacities of mind are nothing short of miraculous, and we are born with a driving intent to express this capacity.*

—JOSEPH CHILTON PEARCE,  
MAGICAL CHILD

Rob loved music from an early age, and that remains the passion of his life, driving him to study and play several hours every day. None of my children were forced to do these things; they were just “born that way”!

In *Born That Way*, author William Wright focuses on studies of identical twins who were raised apart. Though brought up separately, the twins often had remarkable similarities in interests, hobbies, tastes, and professional careers. Wright concludes, “Genes influence not just physical characteristics such as hair color, . . . but our personalities, temperaments, behavioral patterns—even personal idiosyncrasies, the quirks and foibles that make each person unique.”<sup>6</sup>

Genes also influence our talents and skills, according to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*.<sup>7</sup> It works like this: we come into this world neurologically predisposed to a talent or skill. Artists, for example, are born with a sensitivity to light, color, shape, and form; they actually “see” differently than the rest of us do. Athletes and dancers and surgeons possess an inborn sense of coordination and “move” more gracefully than the rest of us. Budding scientists have a brain that sorts and catalogues and understands the nature of physical things in a way different from the rest of us.

Talent alone, however, is not enough. Talent needs mentoring and “exercise.” That’s where you come in: adults must introduce children to activities, groups, volunteer opportunities, and mentors if the children are to develop their talents and skills and learn how to make a career out of their interests.

One more thing is needed to perfect your children’s talents: joy.

Joy?

### *What does joy have to do with it?*

Malcolm Gladwell was motivated to discover what “superstars” like hockey player Wayne Gretzky, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and neurosurgeon Charlie Wilson have in common.<sup>8</sup> His conclusion: they share the ability to translate physical talent into action or imagination. Gladwell sees in these “physical geniuses” a natural coordination perfected by practice; what separates these superstars from those who are merely very good is the faculty of imagination. The foundation their abilities rest on, however, is that what they are doing makes them happy.

Happy? Yes! Charlie Wilson finds the act of surgery irresistible, Wayne Gretzky would rather play hockey than anything else, and Yo-Yo Ma, bored striving for perfection, found he had to opt for expression. It makes sense, doesn't it? We come into the world with inborn talents that make certain activities easier and, therefore, more enjoyable for us. That enjoyment shapes the kinds of information we take in and the experiences we're drawn to, which, in turn, influence the way we learn and the time we are willing to spend on practice. If we were born to do something, we enjoy it, and if we enjoy it, we are willing to work at it.

## *Six steps to identifying and developing your child's inborn talents and skills*

Success, it turns out, usually starts with an inborn talent. Let's look at how family and mentors can identify and nurture that talent and find ways for children to use their talents in school and in the community.

### **1** OBSERVE YOUR CHILD

Look for those moments when your child is "lost" in what he is doing; those moments when your son is fully absorbed, curious, and engaged; the times when your daughter forgets to eat, forgets whether she is tired or cold or hungry because she is so interested in what she's doing. Look for those activities your son enjoys so much he doesn't care about recognition or rewards. Find those times, and you're on your way to identifying your child's talents.

Talk with your child about those activities and help the child connect feeling happy with the activities that engage him or her. One dad remarked to his son, "I love watching you design aircraft; you look so interested and happy!" A mom said to a budding artist, "You just light up the room when you're drawing." My neighbor told my son, "You sure are meticulous when you're handling car parts. You'd make a great mechanic!"

Counselors remark time and again that successful students have the same traits we all need to succeed:

- Curiosity
- Willingness to take risks
- Willingness to experiment
- Physical vigor
- Dedication to principles
- Love of learning for its own sake



*"I'm 15 years old. I don't have a job, but am desperately seeking one. Could you help me? I hear they only hire 16 yr olds. I want a job to keep myself busy and to learn exactly what work is. If it's hard work I don't care. I just want to work and I'm not talking about housework cause I could do the whole house in half an hour."*

—STEPHANIE



The biggest predictors of career success in any field are an individual's interest in learning about the field and his or her enjoyment in working in that field.

## 2 POINT OUT YOUR CHILD'S TALENTS AND SKILLS

Believe it or not, the easier a subject or task is for us, the more likely we are to discount that we have any talent for it. That's why sociologists tell us that talent is a "social construct"—we need to be told by people we care about that we're talented. When I mentioned to my granddaughter that it seemed she had artistic talent, she replied, "Oh, I just love to draw. It's easy for me; it doesn't take much talent." "No, you do have talent," I said. "Do you want to see how I would draw that flower?" That done, she agreed that maybe she was talented!

A friend of mine asked her goddaughter, "What do you like to do so much that when you are doing it, you forget what time it is? Or that when you are doing it, you feel most completely and totally you?" "I like to sort things," she answered finally and talked about all the different categories she used for arranging her possessions, that reorganizing her art supplies was more enjoyable for her than doing the art projects themselves. My friend pointed out all the skills required to sort and that it was a very valuable skill for scientists, librarians, and database designers, for example, and that lots of people needed her kind of skills.

Don't know where to begin? Turn to the appendices, and do the exercises there with your child. They're easy and fun, especially if you do them with your child and compare answers.

## 3 SHOW YOUR CHILD HOW HIS OR HER TALENTS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD

Children are wonderfully idealistic. They want to make the world a better place. It's a mistake to talk about jobs and salaries at this stage of a child's life. Motivations that come from the inside, like caring about others, loving the talent area for its own sake, or wanting to improve life for others are much stronger incentives for middle schoolers than the promise of good jobs or high salaries.

Researchers who followed talented teens into their later years found that students who feel cheerful, strong, excited, open, successful, skillful, and motivated while in their talent areas were more committed to continue in those areas years later. And for teens, excitement often comes from seeing how what they love to do makes a difference to others.<sup>9</sup>

*Unfortunately, a sizable proportion of all students continue to make decisions about the study of advanced math and science in a vacuum, devoid of adult support and appropriate information.*

NACME RESEARCH LETTER (2001)

So show your child, for example, how good engineering makes people safer and more comfortable, how design and color add to our enjoyment, how caring health professionals can ease suffering, how art and literature enrich our lives. The “no pain, no gain” theory of talent development is well known, but, when successful people are interviewed in depth, what stands out is not the pain, but the sense of joy in their work and their deep interest in helping others.

## 1 CONNECT YOUR MIDDLE SCHOOLER WITH SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY GROUPS THAT SHARE HER OR HIS INTERESTS

It’s common for parents to focus on their child’s school, schoolwork, and school success or problems, but, in fact, a school is not where your child is going to live out her or his life—the community is!

Adolescents need to see how adults find a place in the community to enjoy their interests—whether it’s computers, science, tools and machinery, music, sports—and to contribute to issues they care about. That’s why youth experts agree that young people need activities directed not only toward self-development (skill building, personal relationship skills) but toward community development as well.

Parents tend to overemphasize school and personal skill building and underemphasize community activities that give an outlet for children’s idealistic, creative, and constructive impulses—impulses that are driven by children’s need to be important to someone, to make a real difference in their environment, and to have an impact on issues they care about.

Consider volunteering as a family while your children are still young so that they have an opportunity to demonstrate their competency in real-life situations and get to see how the world works. Children need situations where they have responsibility for others and can take some risks. Give them an opportunity to test themselves and to learn what the community needs and how their talents can help. Learning that individuals can make a difference is powerful! Learning that *you* make a difference is empowering!

## 5 HELP YOUR CHILD FIND MENTORS

Mentors can act as powerful allies for your middle schooler. Adults working in the field your child is interested in can give your child a vision of the future and act as role models, providing great motivation for your child to keep up with his or her studies. Mentors can also give your child the “inside scoop” on the knowledge and tools of a craft and the discipline required to be successful, and provide needed feedback on your child’s skills and knowledge.

### *Middle school students need:*

- Diverse learning experiences.
- Opportunities to explore who they are as individuals.
- Meaningful participation in their school and community.
- Positive social interaction with peers and adults.
- A sense of competence and achievement.
- Physical activity.
- Structure and clear limits.

THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS (1989)

## *High expectations, but not too high!*

Psychologist Susan DeMersseman asks parents if the people they know who went to Stanford or Harvard are any happier than those they know who went to other colleges or universities? If not, she asks, “What are we doing to our kids?” She warns that overpressured, overprogrammed kids tend to wear out and don’t develop the capacity to pursue self-initiated activities. “Have high expectations that your child will do his or her best,” she suggests, “but also appreciate your child for who your child is and help him or her find activities that give pleasure, regardless of grades, money, or status.”

“REDEFINE ‘SUCCESS’ FOR KIDS,”  
THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR  
(May 15, 2002)

Sometimes mentors help children find worthwhile volunteer positions and internships. Think of mentors as if they were coaches. Teens who are athletic or musical have the advantage of having lots of personal contact with a knowledgeable and caring adult who can coach them—that is, talk to them about the field, provide them with contacts in the larger society to learn or do more, counsel them through difficult times, and, best of all, give them a place to experiment and test their skills.

Sports and music coaches aren’t difficult to find, but what about mentors for kids interested in graphic arts, science, or computers? Look for clubs, community service agencies, or businesses that include kids in their activities. Perhaps your community includes groups involved in saving wetlands or lobbying to build skate parks for kids. Consider groups that do community service, such as tutoring, raising food for the needy, or sending medical supplies overseas. Or contact groups organized around interests like bird watching, photography, collecting and restoring cars or planes—the possibilities are endless! It’s great to teach your children how their interests and knowledge can benefit these activities or groups. Remember, they’re going to have to make their way in the real world, not at home or in school!

## 6 CONSIDER ALL THE OPTIONS AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Start talking to your child in middle school about all the ways education can be continued after high school. Most of us say post high school and college in one breath. Some families even have a college in mind before their child is born! But what if that child is born to be a car mechanic and not a physician? What if her learning style dictates hands-on learning rather than university lectures?

Explore all the options, and then be sure the option chosen is really what your child wants, not what you want. Sure, about 67 percent of all high school graduates in Washington State do go on to a two- or four-year college after secondary school, but many of them drop out in their first year because they don’t really know why they are in college or didn’t take the right classes and develop good academic skills while in middle school and high school. The lesson to be learned here is, fit the education to the child, not the other way ‘round!

## *How one family's doing it*

The Longe family is following the six steps to identifying and developing their son Alex's inborn talents and interests. Can you spot the steps they've taken in the following account?

"We noticed that Alex was very observant and curious, even as a baby and toddler. He was always very interested in how things worked. We spent lots of his playtime in building and taking apart things, so we had lots of construction toys—Legos and blocks when he was young, models and electronics kits when he got older.

"Alex was always making 'potions' in the tub, putting stuff in the freezer just to see how it would turn out. One time he got out about 20 paper cups and put a bit of every powdered spice/seasoning in the cupboard in each cup and mixed them with water to see what dissolved and what didn't. Then he let the cups sit for days to see what happened when the water evaporated. We told him that someday he would be a great scientist.

"Later we steered him into hands-on classes in robotics, physics, and computers at the local science center. Throughout middle school, we made sure he took math and science every year, and he helped in the computer lab during study hall. We took advantage of the after-school activities offered by his school, and Alex was able to learn how to build rockets.

"Now Alex wants to join a local rocket-building club. And our neighbor, who is an engineer at Boeing, has offered to take him to work with her for a few days this summer so that Alex can see how 737s are made."





## *Five strategies for parenting adolescents*

**1 Love and connect.** Teens need parents and adults to develop and maintain a relationship with them that offers support and acceptance, while accommodating and encouraging the teen's increasing maturity.

**2 Monitor and observe.** Teens need parents and adults to be aware of (and let teens know they are aware of) their activities—school performance, work experiences, after-school activities, peer relationships, and recreation—in a way that involves less direct supervision and more communication, observation, and networking with other adults.

**3 Guide and limit.** Teens need parents and adults to uphold a clear but growing set of boundaries, maintaining important family rules and values, but also encouraging increased competence and maturity. Loosen up, but don't let go.

**4 Model and consult.** Teens need parents and adults to provide ongoing information and support around decision making, values, skills, goals, and interpreting and navigating the larger world, teaching by example and ongoing dialogue.

**5 Provide and advocate.** Teens need parents and adults to provide adequate nutrition, clothing, shelter, and health care, plus a supportive home environment and a network of caring adults.

*RAISING TEENS: A SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH AND A FOUNDATION FOR ACTION (2001)*



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# Making Sense of Middle School

Do you ever find yourself thinking, “Why should I send my sweet and loving little fifth-grader into that big, scary middle school full of kids with saggy pants, acne, and attitude? Wouldn’t it be better to keep kids away from places like middle school until they are, say, ready for college?”

It’s natural to worry about your child’s move from elementary school to middle school. It’s a big transition for both you and your child. It means leaving the safe and cheery world of elementary school and entering the rough-and-tumble land of middle school, where everything seems bigger, louder, and messier.

It may help you to recall what it was like taking your son or daughter to kindergarten for the first time. Do you remember how scary it was to leave your five-year-old in what at the time seemed to be a great big school? Sending your child off to middle school is a bit like that experience. It’s hard to believe your child is ready for the challenge, but relax, she is.

There’s no doubt that your concerns about middle school are real. You may fear becoming lost in a system where your child’s friends, teachers, school assignments, and academic progress aren’t so easy to keep track of. Your child may be overwhelmed, too, with moving from class to class, dealing with multiple teachers, using a locker, and making new friends. And uh-oh, isn’t this the age kids begin to experiment with drugs, sex, and alcohol?

Time to swallow hard and realize that middle school is just one more step in the process of your child’s becoming an adult. The fact is middle school is a necessary transition time between elementary school and high school. It’s a place your child will accomplish some important intellectual and social development. Good middle schools provide the opportunity for kids to gradually take on more responsibility for their education while exploring new activities and having fun.

## *Your first visit: prepare for pandemonium*

Walking into a middle school for the first time is shocking, there’s no way around it. The building will probably look a little worse for wear. There probably won’t be bulletin boards full of adorable student artwork. And if you happen to come when classes are changing, your first reaction may likely be, “Take cover!”

Instead of taking cover, let this become your mantra: “Middle school is a different world from elementary school.” Don’t compare the

*“At first it was scary, but later on in the middle of the year I was able to fit right in, and it became fun. It’s really fun once you get used to it.”*

“TRANSITION TO A MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOL: WHAT KIDS SAY” (1992)



*"Sixth grade is like kindergarten, like starting all over again."*

"TRANSITION TO A MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOL: WHAT KIDS SAY" (1992)

### *Work that locker!*

A Georgia middle school holds an annual "Locker Night" for incoming sixth graders. Because new middle schoolers often stress out about using lockers, the school invites them to come in with their parents, on an evening before school starts, to get their lockers and combination locks from their homeroom teachers and to practice opening their lockers to their hearts' content.

THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS (1989)

middle school experience to an elementary school experience; that just won't work. You're dealing with a whole new age group with different needs and behaviors, so you have to shift your thinking.

In middle school, kids are not only bigger, they also seem to be in constant motion—jostling each other, showing off, and yelling to their friends. When they crowd the hallways, it may look like chaos, but it's normal middle school behavior. They love their friends, they relate to each other by physical contact, and school is prime time for socializing.

Look into a classroom and you may find it as busy as the hallways. Again, the way middlers learn and the work they do is different from their elementary school experience. Students build on the reading, writing, math, and science skills they learned in elementary school, but during middle school, the emphasis is learning *how* to learn—thinking problems through and solving them, doing research, and working in teams on long-term projects. So the classroom may be much more active, with kids working in groups on projects and reporting back to the rest of the class with their findings.

You'll probably notice that middle school teachers are a different breed of educator from elementary school teachers. They have to love dealing with the energy and emotions of middlers. They have to be tuned in to the middle school lifestyle. Their teaching methods need to give students opportunities to explore subjects by using a variety of resources: computers, the arts, and hands-on activities. A middle school teacher's classroom style should be one in which students feel that their voices are heard, that they make a difference.

So, if you *don't* see discussion and movement, teachers interacting with the kids, and kids acting like kids, *then* it's time to worry. Don't expect a tidy environment with kids walking quietly in line. What you need to look for is engaged teaching and engaged learning.

## *Three good things about middle school*

1. **Middle school is like high school with training wheels.** Middle school eases kids into the world of operating independently at school. Imagine how confusing high school would have been for you if you had not had the middle school experience of having a locker and changing classrooms. In middle school, kids have to start taking charge of their day: moving from class to class on time, using a locker, changing clothes for gym.

Students also have to take more responsibility for schoolwork and after-school activities. They must keep track of assignments from four

or five different teachers and take the initiative to find out about clubs, teams, and other learning opportunities offered by the school.

Scary stuff for a 12-year-old, right?

You bet, but in middle school, your child can practice these skills with the guidance of understanding teachers. If your child happens to “fall off her two-wheeler,” so to speak, someone will help her get back on. The truth is if kids make a mistake in middle school, the consequences are less serious than in high school. What we’re shooting for in middle school is for students to enjoy some degree of independence within a safe and protected environment so that by the time they reach high school, they’ll be ready to roll!

2. **Middle schools are designed with pre-adolescents in mind.** Just as a good preschool is equipped with toys and activities that deal with the developmental needs of toddlers, a good middle school is set up to meet your young adolescent’s needs—physical, developmental, and social.

That means your child’s middle school may offer after-school activities such as dances and a chess club or drama program and provide rock-climbing instruction in gym class. The school day, curriculum, social activities, and after-school programs are designed to appeal to the curious middle schooler.

Middle school faculty and staff have skills and experience geared to the age group. For example, many middle schools use a “block schedule” that gives teachers more time to explore their respective subject areas. Ideally, these longer classes are project-driven rather than lecture-driven. Students are encouraged to work in groups on longer-term assignments such as writing a play or skit or doing hands-on science experiments. Ask your middle school what types of special programs they have to engage pre-adolescent learners.

3. **Counselors are standing by to help.** Finally, all middle schools have counselors—and a good counselor can be a great resource for parents. Middle school counselors are different from high school counselors in that they are not concerned with helping kids find colleges or jobs but are totally focused on helping kids succeed in school.

Your child’s counselor can be your eyes and ears in middle school. Because your child has multiple teachers, the counselor can be the go-between and gatherer of information to help you keep track of your child’s progress. And if your child has a problem, the counselor can arrange for meetings and formulate a plan to get your child back on track.

### *In a successful middle school . . .*

- The principal provides strong leadership.
- The school has a philosophy that is accepted by the teachers, administration, students, and parents.
- The building is neat, clean, and in good repair.
- Student work is displayed.
- Parents are involved in decision-making roles.
- Teachers and staff are visible outside their classrooms and offices.
- The school is safe for students, teachers, and staff.
- Absentee and suspension rates are low.
- Students, teachers, and staff enjoy being at school.
- The school has a well-understood approach to discipline in place.

*THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS (1989)*

*This is only a test!*

A Kentucky middle school has a “practice school day” for new students from 9 a.m. to noon before school starts for the year. The incoming sixth graders can get their schedules, meet their teachers, tour the building, and practice opening their lockers, all safely away from the critical eyes of seventh and eighth graders!

THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS (1989)

So, make friends with your child’s counselor! Be sure to introduce yourself at orientation events or by phone. Talk about concerns you may have about your child and how the counselor can best reach you—at work or at home.

### *Three not-so-good things about middle school*

1. **Getting lost in the crowd.** It’s an unfortunate fact that middle schools are usually big—sometimes much bigger than elementary schools. That means your child may be going from a school that served 200 to 300 students to one that might have an enrollment of more than 1,000. Class size, too, may be higher, with an average of 32 students per class.

You may be thinking, “Yikes! My little baby in such a huge school!” Well, that can work one of two ways—your child may find the new and larger environment exciting and stimulating or simply overwhelming.

What you have to guard against most with a larger school is your child possibly getting lost in the crowd. To prevent that, some large middle schools have broken each grade level into smaller groupings so that teachers and counselors can keep track of each student and his or her progress more easily. Ask if your child’s school makes a specific effort to track every student and his or her needs.

If your child attends a large middle school, you may need to check daily during the first few weeks of school that he gets to class on time, understands homework assignments, and is making friends. Be a nudge—ask your child if she is comfortable in school, whom she eats lunch with, and other nosy parent-type questions.

2. **Keeping in touch may get tougher.** Gone are the days of dealing with one classroom, one teacher, and lots of notes and flyers that came home promptly in your child’s backpack. Compared to elementary school, middle school is a black hole when it comes to home-school communication.

Often middle schools rely on the students to tell their parents about events or to take action on information themselves. And we all know how reliable that is . . . so, get ready for some detective work, because you’ll need to find out how your middle school communicates with parents.

Most middle schools have newsletters that are either mailed or sent home regularly with students. Make sure you know the newsletter schedule so that you can be on the lookout for each

issue. During the first year, you may need to sit down with your child every week or so to dig through his or her binder and backpack to retrieve messages from school.

Many schools today have websites that are updated regularly to inform students and parents about events and activities. A great way to find out what's going on in your child's school—and to have input—is to join the school's Parent-Teacher-Student Association (PTSA) and attend its meetings. Often information discussed at PTSA meetings doesn't make it into newsletters or onto the website. The bottom line is: call or visit your child's school to learn how you can best keep informed.

3. **Keeping it all together.** Some experts say middle school is all about kids getting organized and learning to take responsibility for their school studies and activities. Good training for the rest of their lives, right? But like learning any new skills, this process may take time, and some kids will pick up the skills faster than others will.

So, what do you do when your math genius fails math because he can't seem to keep track of his homework? Or your budding actress doesn't get cast in the school play because she missed tryouts?

At this stage of your child's life, back away somewhat from nagging about school activities—like homework, permission slips, sports team signups, whatever—and let your child take charge, even if that means he or she occasionally fails. We all know giving our children the freedom to make mistakes is one of the hardest parts of being a parent, but without that freedom, your child may take longer to complete the transition to independence. Sure, be ready to help out—but be ready to let your child struggle a little as he or she practices taking responsibility for schoolwork and activities.

### *What you can do to make the big move go smoothly*

So, we've reviewed the good, the bad, and the ugly about middle school and a healthy approach for parents to take regarding the realities of middle school life. To recap:

- Realize that middle school is a really different environment from elementary school.
- Expect a few bumps in the road as your child learns to navigate this new environment.
- Practice the art of letting go of your child while still providing a solid safety net.
- Get ready for your child to bloom with the new skills he or she will learn.



*"Hi, I'm 13 and I'll be starting high school soon. Things to do with the human brain/how it works fascinate me, but I don't like things to do with surgery or blood so neurosurgeon is OUT! Anyways, I was wondering if you could be helpful on some possibilities open to me and what courses in school would be best for any of those possibilities. Thank you."*

—FAIROZE



*"Parents hate middle school  
because it makes them realize  
that their children aren't  
little kids anymore."*

—DANA JACKSON, PARENT

### *Top concerns of new middle schoolers*

- Getting to class on time
  - Finding their lockers
  - Keeping up with homework
- Finding the lunchroom and bathrooms
- Getting the right bus home
- Getting through the hallways
- Remembering which class to go to next

"TRANSITION TO A MIDDLE  
LEVEL SCHOOL: WHAT KIDS SAY"  
(1992)

Are there specific things you can do to help your child get ready for the big leap into middle school? You bet! The key to making this change as painless as possible for your child—and for you—is being prepared. First, take a good look at your child and think about what aspect of middle school might be difficult for him or her. Help your child practice the skills you feel he or she may be lacking to handle the new environment and responsibilities successfully. For example, if your daughter is notorious for forgetting her homework, work out a system for remembering it now. Then, be sure that once you have chosen a middle school, you take advantage of any services the school offers to help orient new students.

Here are some other good ideas to pave the way for your child:

- Get your child involved in picking the school. Even if you have already decided on a school, be sure your child attends new-family tours with you. By seeing the school, your son or daughter can begin to imagine and plan for what being at the school will be like.
- Don't talk negatively about middle school because your child may pick up on your mood and become afraid or anxious. Instead, focus on how great it will be for your child to go to a new school, make new friends, and learn to be more independent.
- Help your child practice being independent. Let your fifth grader organize her schoolwork, pack her own backpack, be responsible for completing homework, and make her school lunch.
- Have your family start being a part of the school as soon as possible. Attend middle school events that are open to the public such as band concerts, science fairs, and plays. Those events can help your child get excited about school.
- Go to all orientation events offered by the school. I repeat: Go to all orientation events offered by the school! Be sure to introduce yourself to your child's teachers and his or her counselor. If there is no formal orientation, drop by school before the first day and let your child walk around to get used to the building.
- Reduce "locker anxiety" by getting your child a combination lock so that he or she can practice opening a "locker lock."
- Get equipped for school. Call the school to get a list of the supplies your child will need. Shop for the supplies with your child to avoid getting ones your child may think are "uncool."

## *The move to middle school: what schools can do*

*1* Create a team of sixth grade students that visits the “feeder” elementary schools to talk with fifth graders about what middle school is like. Or invite groups of fifth graders to spend part of a school day visiting classes or special events at the middle school.

*2* Invite fifth grade students from feeder schools to middle school events. Attending a band concert, science fair, or school play can help future students see the fun side of middle school life.

*3* Hold an orientation event specifically for incoming students and their parents. This could be an afternoon or evening event where students can meet their teachers, walk around the school to find their classrooms, and locate their lockers.

*4* Schedule a meeting or workshop where parents can learn more about the school and discuss supporting their children during adolescence.

*5* Create an informal event, such as an evening coffee soon after school starts, where parents have the opportunity to get to know the principal and other key staff members.

*THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS (1989)*



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# Making the Most of Middle School for Your Child

When your child was in elementary school, it was pretty easy to see how you could help out: assisting the teacher in the classroom, putting up bulletin boards, going on field trips, baking brownies for the Halloween party, all provided you with an opportunity to feel connected to your child's schooling.

But in middle school, it's a different picture. Suddenly your child has six teachers instead of one, there are no bulletin boards, and the Halloween party is now a dance, where you'd better not even *think* about showing your face. So where does a parent fit in?

Learning how to connect with your child's school during the middle school years is no easy task. Your child may squirm at the thought of your showing up at school. Although it may seem the last person in the world your child wants around is you, middle school is the *most* important time for you to be involved in your child's education.

Parent involvement during the middle school years calls for less hands-on work in the classroom and more behind-the-scenes work at home and with the school in general. You can still bake those brownies, but think more about being your child's backup, advocate, and audience. As Charlene Giannetti and Margaret Sagarese say about middle school parents in their book *The Roller Coaster Years*, "The essence of your new role is a twist on an old saying: 'Parents should be seen but not heard.'"

Another important role for middle school parents is thinking ahead for your child. The section "Discovering Your Middle Schooler's Abilities" will help you identify and encourage your child's interests, skills, and strengths. Now you need to think about how middle school can help your child build on those interests, skills, and strengths. What courses should your child take to prepare for high school and beyond? Though your child's high school graduation may seem a long way off at this point, middle school is the time to determine the skills he or she will need to master now to continue education after high school.

Above all, pay attention to what your middle school offers in terms of math, science, and technology. The research is clear: the more math a student takes, the better that student will do throughout his or her academic career. Today's middle schoolers have to learn basic algebra and geometry before entering high school to fit in all the high school math courses they'll need to pursue further education and careers. And technology? Don't leave school without it!

*Students who aspire to  
technology-driven careers—  
such as astronaut and  
engineer—still plan to drop  
math as soon as the  
option is offered.*

NACME RESEARCH LETTER (2001)

## You're not done with the PTSA yet

It isn't that surprising that research indicates children are more successful throughout their education if their parents take an active part in their learning. The newest research shows that parent involvement makes a difference throughout middle school, high school, and college. So, get ready for many more years of parent meetings, poetry contests, band concerts, and science and technology fairs!

Parents' involvement in their child's school is usually very high in the elementary grades, but tends to drop off sharply when the child approaches his or her teens. Parents don't realize that middle school is exactly the wrong time to become disengaged. These are critical years for your child in terms of academic and social development, and they need you to be involved more than ever.

In his research for the book *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*, author Laurence Steinberg studied 20,000 teenagers from nine high schools over 20 years. A few findings drawn from Steinberg's interviews make it clear parents need to stay involved with their child's education:

- More than half of the students said they could bring home grades of C or worse—and one-fourth said they could bring home D's or F's—without their parents getting upset.
- About one-third of the students said their parents had no idea how they were doing in school.
- Only 30 percent of the students said their parents spent some time talking with them each day.

Is it any wonder that kids aren't doing well in school?

Steinberg goes on to describe three ways a family can influence a child to engage or disengage at school.

1. **Parents' messages.** Parents constantly send messages, deliberately or not, about school and learning. Our words (and our silences) signal to our kids exactly how important (or unimportant) their schooling is to us, and from those messages, our children learn how much effort they should put in.
2. **Parents' behavior.** Actions speak louder than words. Parents have many opportunities to demonstrate how important their children's education is. If we attend school functions, volunteer at activities, and so on, we show them that school is worth our time and energy—and they learn that it's worth theirs. If we don't get involved, we send the message that no matter what we say, we don't really consider school all that important.



*"Hi Dr. Susan . . . I was reading your article about a good way to find a job. It is really interesting and full of hope. I am 14 and I was looking for a job. No one wants to hire teens under 16. I am very mature and a hard worker. I was wondering, could you give me any hints on where to look? I hope you can, because, if not I have to wait a whole two years alone. Everyone else in my family has a job! Thanks for the encouragement and may God bless you."*

—NIKIA



*"Sure, some of us may act a little wild or rowdy, but on the inside, we're great. Beneath the shell of 'coolness' that most of us wear, there are brilliant minds, friendly people, and talented artists."*

—ZACH HARTNETT,  
McCLURE MIDDLE SCHOOL  
QUEEN ANNE NEWS (MAY 2002)

### 3. "Parenting style" and the general home atmosphere.

Our everyday approach to child rearing is the most important influence on whether our children will be motivated and engaged in school. The essentials in parenting are:

- Acceptance
- Firmness
- Autonomy

The bottom line is: families matter as much or more as schools do when it comes to a child's educational success.

### *How you can help*

Being involved in your child's school life doesn't mean you have to become PTSA president or chair every candy drive. Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, suggests the following six steps for participating in your child's school experience:

1. Make sure your child is healthy, safe, and prepared for school, and that he or she has a home environment that supports educational progress.
2. Talk about school at home, guiding course choices, valuing education, and monitoring attendance and homework.
3. Learn about school programs and your child's progress through memos, newsletters, report cards, and conferences.
4. Take part in school activities by volunteering to help at school events and attending activities such as student performances and sports.
5. Join school advisory councils, parent-teacher organizations, parent advocacy groups, and other educational committees.
6. Work with community organizations to create more learning opportunities for children such as mentoring programs, after-school activities, cultural events, and community service.

Something as simple as just sitting together in the evening and talking with your child about his or her homework helps. Epstein, who has been studying children and families for more than 20 years, found that parental involvement in a child's education can be one of the strongest predictors of a student's academic success, making more of a difference than a family's educational background or income level.

In one of her studies, Epstein tracked 700 middle schoolers from families with little formal education. Their teachers gave out language arts homework with a new twist—students had to discuss their

assignments with a family member. The students not only achieved higher grades, but became more enthusiastic writers.

So ask yourself, Am I serious about my child's success in school? What am I teaching my child by what I say and do? Do my messages, behavior, and parenting style encourage my child's success? What else can I do to keep my child engaged and connected at school?

## *Getting ready for the future*

People often joke about middle school being a “holding area” for kids with raging hormones or a time when only social skills are being developed. Not so! Middle school marks a real turning point in your child's academic life. It's the time that school really begins to matter in terms of being able to reach future goals. Of course, that's impossible for your sixth grader to see. So, it's up to you to start thinking about what's ahead for your child.

First, follow the steps outlined in “Discovering Your Middle Schooler's Abilities,” the second section of this booklet. Learn what your child cares about and what skills he or she possesses. Next, see how your child can build on those skills and interests by using the curriculum and after-school activities your child's middle school offers.

Does your child love computers? Find out what classes he or she might be able to take during the regular school day. See if students can serve as assistants in the school computer lab. Or maybe your school offers computer classes after school that your child can attend.

Students who use their middle school years to learn about things that interest them enjoy school more and achieve at higher levels than students just going through the motions. They're the ones best prepared to do well in high school and beyond. It also turns out that students who are interested and engaged in school and out of school are the least likely to engage in risky behavior.

Now is the time to ask your middle school counselor about the coursework your child needs to prepare for and to graduate from high school and college. Experts say that middle school students planning to continue their education after high school—and good jobs demand that they do—should take courses in the following subject areas:

- Math, including algebra and geometry
- English, science, and history every year
- Foreign language
- Computer technology
- Arts, including music, art, and drama

## *What parents expect from middle schools*

- My child is safe at school.
- My child knows at least one adult well enough to go to for help.
- The school is concerned about helping my child develop positive friendships.
- The school provides opportunities for my child to get involved with activities.
- My child is eager to go to school.
- The school is preparing my child for high school.
- Teachers keep me informed of my child's progress.

THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS (1989)



### *Five ways you can help your child love math and science*

**1** Have high expectations. Expect your child to do well in math and science.

**2** Help your child develop an interest in math and science. Talk to your child about math and science, and listen to what your child says.

**3** Encourage your child to think about careers in math and science.

**4** Explain to your child that hard work leads to success in reaching a goal, a goal that will pay off for your child in the future.

**5** Go with your child to visit science museums, and participate in family math and science activities after school or on weekends.

[www.mathispower.org](http://www.mathispower.org)

## *Planning ahead for high school graduation*

Today's middle school students will enter a high school environment that is very different from that of just a few years ago. Revised and updated graduation standards will require students to show they've mastered the skills needed to succeed after high school. In addition to meeting higher academic standards, students will have to pass a performance assessment and complete projects and internships. These standards and assessments will help students be better prepared for the future.

Middle school families need to be aware of the new high school graduation standards being phased in over a four-year period, from 2001 (graduating class of 2005) to 2004 (graduating class of 2008). To be eligible for high school graduation, a student will have to demonstrate the following:

- Proficiency in the Essential Academic Learning Requirements by passing the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) and earning a certificate of mastery. The requirements are:
  - Reading with comprehension, writing with skill, and communicating effectively and responsibly in a variety of ways and settings.
  - Knowing and applying the core concepts and principles of mathematics; social, physical, and life sciences; civics and history; geography; arts; and health and fitness.
  - Thinking analytically, logically, and creatively, and integrating experience and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems.
  - Understanding the importance of work and how performance, effort, and decisions directly affect future career and educational opportunities.
- Proficiency in state and district goals through a culminating project. The project requires students to synthesize a variety of skills and knowledge from across the curriculum.
- A plan for what the student expects to do the year following high school.

It's essential that your child become engaged in learning during the middle school years. Research shows that children at this age can build on their skills and excel in school or fall further and further behind and be at risk for dropping out of high school. So, be sure to talk with your child about how schoolwork connects to his or her future.

## *Making math, science, and technology a priority*

It isn't hard to find a boatload of scary statistics about how American students fare on tests in math and science in comparison to students in other countries. But even if you ignore how our students stack up against the international field, the research findings about our children's attitudes toward math and the impact those attitudes have on their lives are sobering.

In 1998, the National Research Council reported, "More than any other subject, mathematics filters students out of programs leading to scientific and professional careers. From high school through graduate school, on average, we lose half the students from mathematics each year."

Robert Moses, a well-known civil-rights activist from Mississippi, started Project Algebra in the 1980s to help students get the training in math they needed. He argues: "Today the most urgent social issue affecting poor people and people of color is economic access. In today's world, economic access and full citizenship depend crucially on math and science literacy. I believe that the absence of math literacy in urban and rural communities throughout this country is an issue as urgent as the lack of Black voters in Mississippi was in 1961."<sup>10</sup>

Moses goes on to state that math, science, and technology literacy is a critical filter: people with those skills will have access to good jobs; those without, will not.

The National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering, Inc., polled a cross section of public school students and their parents as well as a sample of schools with higher than average proportions of minority students. The survey found that half of all middle school students planned on dropping math as soon as they could. These same students had a high interest in attending college, but they didn't think math and science courses were important.<sup>11</sup>

Middle school students are opting out of math too early because they don't know how critical math is to their future. They decide that math is too dull or too difficult and end up cutting their chances for success in careers, postsecondary education, and everyday life.

So here's your assignment: encourage your child to take all the math, science, and technology courses possible in middle school and to keep taking those subjects throughout his or her secondary school years. Help your middle schooler understand that mastering math, science, and technology skills can open doors later in life. Try and make the connection between "the power to learn" and "the power to earn."



### *The future is in technology*

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 70% of all jobs require technology literacy; by the year 2010, all jobs will require significant technical skills. If that seems unimaginable, consider this: the U.S. Department of Labor says that 80% of those future jobs do not yet exist!

ROBERT MOSES,  
*RADICAL EQUATIONS* (2001)

## *Math counts!*

Math skills are essential for success after high school. Here are the good, bad, and the ugly truths:

- 83% of high school students who take algebra and geometry enroll in college. Fewer than 42% of high school students who don't take those courses enroll in college.
- Among low-income high school students, 71% of those taking algebra and geometry enroll in college. Only 27% of those who don't take those courses go on to college.
- Minority students who master algebra and geometry in high school succeed in college at almost the same rate as white students.
- More than 50% of today's high school graduates lack the math skills needed in today's job market.
- To give your teen the opportunity to take lots of math courses in high school, jump-start the process in middle school. To have time for high school geometry, trigonometry, pre-calculus, and calculus, students need to master the basics of algebra and geometry by the end of eighth grade.

RICHARD RILEY, "MATHEMATICS EQUALS OPPORTUNITY" (1999)



## Appendix 1: Find Your Strengths

Having your child answer the following questions and discuss those answers with you can help you make an honest evaluation of your child's strengths.

Make a copy of the questions for you and a copy for your child. While your child answers the questions, fill out your copy the way you think your child will answer the questions. Then compare!

1. One subject I have always done well in at school is \_\_\_\_\_.
2. If I could spend the rest of my life doing my favorite thing, my choice would be to \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
3. I always feel good when I am \_\_\_\_\_.
4. I seem to know more about \_\_\_\_\_ than any of my friends.
5. At home, I seem to be the only one who knows anything about \_\_\_\_\_.
6. I seem to get compliments on my ability to \_\_\_\_\_.
7. When it comes to \_\_\_\_\_, I just seem to have a natural ability.
8. When I read a newspaper, I find the \_\_\_\_\_ most interesting.
9. Several teachers have told me I am good in \_\_\_\_\_.
10. The best vacation I ever had was \_\_\_\_\_.
11. The subject or subjects I have the most trouble with and have no interest in ever trying to master is/are \_\_\_\_\_.
12. The field trips or excursions that have been the most exciting to me were \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
13. The movies I most enjoy are usually about \_\_\_\_\_.

Developed by Bob Dannenhold, friend and educational consultant.

## Appendix 2: Finding Flow

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, one of the world's most famous psychologists, has devoted his life to understanding what makes people happy. He says the secret to living a good life is choosing activities that truly interest us and that have clear goals, give immediate feedback, and are a good match between the challenge and our skills. Athletes call this experience “being in the zone.” Csikszentmihalyi calls it “flow,” that rare moment when “what we feel, what we wish, and what we think are all the same.”

Why don't we choose more activities that create Csikszentmihalyi's flow? Surprisingly, because most of us don't know what makes us happy.

In the 1970s Csikszentmihalyi developed the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), which is based on subjects ranking their experiences—in the moment—at random times in the day. Volunteers are given a pager and when signaled, they write down the following:

- Where they are
- Whom they are with
- What they are doing
- What they are thinking about
- How much they are concentrating
- How motivated they feel
- Their level of self-esteem

I thought it would be great to do the ESM with young people to help them recognize what they love to do. So, I recruited my 11-year-old grandson, Andy, to see if a modified exercise would work for him. I gave Andy a small notebook and asked him to take it out every couple of hours for a week and write down where he was, whom he was with, and what he was doing.

He then had to rank his activity on a scale of one to five—with one being “no fun” and five being “very fun.” He agreed to the experiment but told me, “I don't think I'll learn anything. I am already pretty self-aware.”

By the end of the week, even Andy was amazed with his ratings. He found that:

- Watching TV ranked low unless his parents were in the room and they were fooling around together.
- Even reading the “boring stuff” in school rated a five.
- Feeding the birds, one of his chores, always rated a four or higher.
- And here's the real surprise, playing video games did not rate nearly as high as playing Frisbee with his dad and friends.

When I asked Andy about the process the following week, he replied, “I don't carry the notebook with me anymore, but I find myself ranking stuff when I finish it, just to check.” The next week he added, “I think this exercise thing has sort of changed my life; now I rate things before I do them. I'm much better at choosing fives!”

You and your middle schooler can try this at home.

- Rate your respective activities from one to five together throughout a week.
- At the end of the week, compare notes.
- Pay attention to which activities get fives in your child's day.
- See if you can increase “the flow” in your family.

*Adapted from Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life (New York: Basic Books, 1997)*

## Recommended Reading

### BOOKS AND BOOKLETS

#### About parenting adolescents

*The Basics of Adult-Teen Relationships*  
Don Dinkmeyer, Jr., Ph.D.  
Coral Springs, Florida: CMTI Press, 1992

*Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall? A Parent's Guide to the New Teenager*  
Anthony E. Wolf, Ph.D.  
New York: The Noonday Press, 1991

*How to Behave So Your Children Will, Too!*  
Sal Severe, Ph.D.  
New York: Viking, 2000

*Magical Child*  
Joseph Chilton Pearce  
New York: Plume, 1997

*The Parent's Little Book of Lists: DOs and DON'Ts of Effective Parenting*  
Jane Bluestein, Ph.D.  
Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, Inc., 1997. [www.hci-online.com](http://www.hci-online.com)

*The Roller-Coaster Years: Raising Your Child Through the Maddening yet Magical Middle School Years*  
Charlene C. Giannetti and Margaret Sagarese  
New York: Broadway Books, 1997

*The Seven-Year Stretch: How Families Work Together to Grow Through Adolescence*  
Laura S. Kastner, Ph.D., and Jennifer F. Wyatt, Ph.D.  
Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997

*Understanding Early Adolescent Self and Identity: Applications and Interventions*  
Thomas M. Brinthaup and Richard P. Lipka, Eds.  
Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002

#### About teens, schools, and careers

*The Ambitious Generation: America's Teenagers; Motivated but Directionless*  
Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson  
New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1999

*Becoming Adult: How Teenagers Prepare for the World of Work*  
Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Barbara Schneider  
New York: Basic Books, 2000

*Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*  
Laurence Steinberg et al.  
New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996

*Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*  
Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi  
New York: Basic Books, 1997

*The Middle School Years: A Parents' Handbook*  
Nancy Berla et al.  
Columbia, Maryland: National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1989

*School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools*  
Joyce L. Epstein,  
Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001

*What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know*  
Trudy Knowles and David F. Brown  
Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2000

*Winning Teenagers Over in Home and School: A Manual for Parents, Teachers, Counselors, and Principals*  
Francis X. Walton, Ph.D.  
Columbia, South Carolina: Adlerian Child Care Books, 1980



## About adolescence

*Being Adolescent: Conflict and Growth in the Teenage Years*

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson  
New York: Basic Books, 1984

*Raising Teens: A Synthesis of Research and a Foundation for Action*

A. Rae Simpson, Ph.D.

Project on the Parenting of Adolescents  
Boston: Center for Health Communication  
Harvard School of Public Health, 2001  
[www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/parenting/report.pdf](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/parenting/report.pdf)

*The Scapegoat Generation: America's War on Adolescents*

Mike A. Males

Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1996

*A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of Adolescence*

Patricia Hersch

New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998

## ARTICLES

### About the transition to middle school

"Assisting the Elementary School Student in the Transition to a Middle Level School"

Sandra L. Odegaard and Jay A. Heath  
*Middle School Journal* 24(2): 21–25 (1992)

"The Move to Middle School: Middlers Have a Lot More on Their Minds Than Schoolwork. Savvy Parents Work with the Changes and Challenges"

Cheryl Murfin Bond  
*Ten to Eighteen: Parenting Through the Teen Years* 2(7): 3–5 (1999)

"The Transition to Middle Level Schools: Making It a Good Experience for All Students"

Carol Midgley and Tim Urdan  
*Middle School Journal* 24(2): 5–14 (1992)

"Understanding the Impact of Parent–School Involvement on Children's Educational Outcomes"

Gail L. Zellman and Jill M. Waterman  
*The Journal of Educational Research* 91(6): 370 (1998)

"Transition to a Middle Level School: What Kids Say"

Donna Schumacher Arowosafe and Judith L. Irvin  
*Middle School Journal* 24(2): 15–19 (1992)

## WEBSITE PUBLICATIONS

"Listen Up: A First Step to Protecting Teens"

Jan Richter

*Connect for Kids: Guidance for Grownups*

Benton Foundation, 1999

[www.connectforkids.org](http://www.connectforkids.org)

"Progress Toward Power: A Follow-up Survey of Children's and Parents' Attitudes About Math and Science"

*Research Letter* 9(1)

National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering, 2001

[www.nacme.org/pdf/RL-2001-10.pdf](http://www.nacme.org/pdf/RL-2001-10.pdf)

"Rejecting the Myth That Teens Don't Need Us"

Richard Louv

*Connect for Kids: Guidance for Grownups*

Benton Foundation, 1999

[www.connectforkids.org](http://www.connectforkids.org)

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Trudy Knowles and David F. Brown, *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2000).
- <sup>2</sup> A. Rae Simpson, Ph.D., *Raising Teens: A Synthesis of Research and a Foundation for Action* (Boston: Center for Health Communication, Harvard School of Public Health, 2001.) Out of print, but available online at [www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/parenting/report.pdf](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/parenting/report.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> Edward L. Deci and Richard Flaste, *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation* (New York: Penguin, 1995).
- <sup>4</sup> James S. Coleman, *Youth: Transition to Adulthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).
- <sup>5</sup> Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson, *The Ambitious Generation: America's Teenagers: Motivated but Directionless* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1999).
- <sup>6</sup> William Wright, *Born That Way: Genes, Behavior and Personality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).
- <sup>7</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).
- <sup>8</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, "The Physical Genius," *The New Yorker*, August 2, 1999.
- <sup>9</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Kevin Rathund, and Samuel Whalen, *Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- <sup>10</sup> Robert Moses, *Radical Equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
- <sup>11</sup> "Progress Toward Power: A Follow-up Survey of Children's and Parents' Attitudes About Math and Science," *NACME Research Letter* 9(1), October 2001.

## Answers to quiz on page 10

- 1 Three hours a day
- 2 Fewer than 30 minutes a day
- 3 An average of eight minutes
- 4 93 percent
- 5 67 percent



"I am a 15 year old student from Michigan. My idea of a good job would be OF COURSE working with my favorite likes . . . something that I can handle and enjoy doing so I like to work. Likes: Music, tv, movies, video games, flowers. My main goal in life is to become a student at a music institute, working with music production OR tv and film."

—SONIA

# About the Author



Dr. Susan Quattrocio (Dr. Q) is director of the Washington State initiative *A Call to Parents: A Family's Guide to High School and College Success* and of the Northeast Tech Prep Consortium, a consortium of nine school districts and five community and technical colleges, located at Bellevue Community College, Bellevue, Washington. A respected authority on the future of work and the educational needs of young people, Dr. Q co-authored *Giving Children Hope and Skills for the 21st Century* and *Did Somebody Say College? How to Reduce the Costs and Risks of After-High School Education*. Dr. Q has given hundreds of presentations and workshops to parents of K–12 students as well as K–12 and community college teachers, counselors, and administrators throughout the nation. She also developed the *Call to Parents* workshop series and provides “train the trainers” certification workshops in several states.

Among her various academic and professional appointments, Dr. Q was associate dean of instruction at Everett Community College, Everett, Washington, and director of evening vocation programs at Lake Washington Technical College, Kirkland, Washington, and held a variety of leadership positions in youth employment and training programs in Michigan. She has lectured at Wayne State University in Detroit, developed the *Teen Career Exploration* website for the Public Broadcasting System, which ran for four years and motivated thousands of teens to communicate with her by e-mail, and created seven National Public Radio commentaries on teen employment and postsecondary education. This broad experience with young people prompted Susan to reach out to parents to let them know that they, not educators, have the greatest impact on their children's educational and career success.

On a more personal note, Dr. Q raised five children and worked full-time while simultaneously earning her M.A. and Ph.D. in education from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Thanks to them, she says, she was able to complete the degrees and also stay sort of sane!

You can reach Susan at her website: [www.calltoparents.org](http://www.calltoparents.org).

*Do the words 'middle school' strike fear into your heart?*

*Do you have a child who's in the midst of, or about to enter, the exciting and confusing world of middle school?*

*Do you teach or work at a middle school, surrounded by kids going through this special time in their lives?*

In her new book, *Help, I've Got a Middle Schooler!*, Dr. Susan Quattrociochi (Dr. Q) guides you through the ins and outs of getting through this unique time with humor and grace. This book will help you see that adolescents are curious, creative, and social beings who still need lots of love and guidance from caring adults.

With more than 20 years of experience working with parents, teens, and educators, Dr. Q is passionate about her message: All families have the power to make a positive impact on their children's educational and career success.

*For more information, visit*  
**[www.calltoparents.org](http://www.calltoparents.org)**