

Social Emotional Support During the Middle School Years

To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment. –Ralph Waldo Emerson

Developmental psychologists have framed the middle school years as a time our children experiment with different personalities, roles and behaviors associated with their temporary selves. The process is somewhat analogous to sifting through a pile of markers to determine which are still vibrant and which are dried up and no longer useful, except this testing process for our children comes with greater risk and reward.

Extensive exploration in social interaction and personal expression is normal and expected. The challenge presents itself when this experimentation creates turbulence within classrooms, families and other communities that strive to be positive places where learning and mistake making are accepted and supported. With the right support, our burgeoning adolescents develop an internal sense of their values, their identities and their personal strengths and weaknesses.

Perhaps you can recall some of the experiments you tried in your own coming of age. Common innocuous examples include trying a new hair style or manner of dress, expressing a preference or distaste for a particular movie, band or other popular culture phenomenon and trying new hobbies or sports. Other experiments are more harmful, but still originate from the same self-seeking place within our growing children. Behaviors such as sending inflammatory or explicit text messages, teasing a peer, and pushing the limits of what is acceptable to say aloud are common experiments that can lead to hurt feelings, shattered perceptions and deep beliefs about an adolescent's tenuous place in the world. Engaging in risk taking behaviors that test physical limits and experiences are also common such as substance use or daredevil actions.

We—as educators and parents—are partners in this journey of exploration. We have assembled a list of ways we support your child's journey of self-discovery, as well as some tips and resources to support you in weathering this often tumultuous and enlivening developmental phase.

Here are the ways that the MSD Middle School Staff and School Community support the self-seeking adolescent:

- Social Emotional Programming
 - Homeroom
 - Forum

- Supporting teachable moments
- Intercession offers opportunity for experimentation/exploration of new concepts/activities/interests
- Emphasize our school values of Cooperation, Assertion, Responsibility, Empathy and Self-Control.
- Create a culture where teachers cultivate relationships with students. (“Kids don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”)
- Utilize cooperative and collaborative learning wherever possible to engineer various group dynamics for students to explore their identities within the context of academic problem solving.
- Highlight the importance of being of service to others, consistent with our mission to do good in the world. Socktober, restorative justice, making lunch for Father Woody’s Shelter, reading with Primary students and supporting campus-wide recycling are all service experiences in the middle school.

Here are resources you can use to support your middle school child as he or she endeavors to uncover an answer to the age old question: Who am I?

- How to be a middle school parent article:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rachel-vail/top-15-things-your-middle-school-kid-wishes-you-knew_b_5844308.html
- Honor the middle school brain
 - This is the second fastest growth spurt for their brains and bodies since infancy.
 - In particular, peer approval has been shown to be highly rewarding to the teen brain which may be why teens are more likely to take risks when other teens are around.
 - Because of the brain changes, teens will often misread peers, teachers and parents and often times react with intense emotional rage, fear or aggression.

Dr. Michael Thompson, co-author of *Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children* recently spoke in the Denver area. Here are some highlights from his presentation and handout.

- Support your child’s friendships. Get to know your adolescent’s friends. Dr. Thompson recommends buying pizza. ;-)
- Don’t “interview for pain.” Our children’s pain is irresistible by design. However, at this developmental stage, avoid reinforcing

the negative aspects of middle school life by cultivating the positive in your interactions.

- Model friendship with your own adult friends. Help your children understand that you do not always like everything your friends say and do, but you allow friends to be human beings and you avoid drama wherever possible.
- Don't gossip about the social functioning of your child's school, sports teams or other communities. Model kindness and inclusion.
- Stay with it. America is the most individualistic nation on earth. Community does not always come easy!
- Read the entire book: *Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children* by Michael Thomson, Catherine O'Neill and Larry Cohen (2002).

Cindy Souser, LMFT
Middle School Counselor

Sara B. Knickerbocker
Director of Learning Support