



What You Should Know About Middle Schoolers

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by Linda Perlstein

Elizabeth, a seventh grader, seems like a kid who's got it together: two parents at home for dinner; a nice house; well-behaved friends she sits with at lunch; plenty of ribbons for synchronized swimming; straight A's; and perfect attendance.

So why did she all of a sudden break down in the hallway one day before English class, heaving and wailing for a solid five minutes and sobbing for another 15?

An hour earlier, she had gotten into an argument with a teacher about wiping the lunch table. She was stressed about her upcoming bat mitzvah. Mitch, a boy in social studies class, had been teasing her. She had gossiped about one of her swimming teammates and what she'd said had spread *everywhere*. At her next meet she wanted to do well, though she didn't want to expect too much of herself in case she fell short. Her strings teacher had been making all sorts of demands on her, which by the tenets of middle school justice Elizabeth saw as an attempt to single her out. She complained about it to friend in Spanish class and got snapped at for talking.

A reasonable observer would conclude that Elizabeth is blowing things out of proportion. But it was situations like these, that I observed when writing *Not Much Just Chillin': The Hidden Lives of Middle Schoolers*, that make clear how little we know about young adolescents—and how not knowing is affecting our relationships with them and ultimately their future success. Every adult in a middle school needs to understand who these kids are.

What They're Going Through

Middle schoolers have always been selectively sullen, shamelessly self-absorbed, and hopelessly obsessed with winning the admiration of their peers. In some ways, the preadolescent brain can't keep up with the demands on it. The frontal lobes, where organization and judgment and reasoning reside, aren't as well developed as the emotional centers. Knowledge doesn't necessarily translate into appropriate behavior, which makes it difficult to deal with the pressures of preadolescence.

Bullying is complicated in middle school, where it's less about the prototypical take-your-lunch-money bully than about group exclusion—a nastiness so subtle that teachers and administrators often don't notice.

It's become so common for parents to share their burdens with middle school children that I have had kids tell me they didn't want to bring up some problem they were having because their parents had enough to worry about.

Preadolescents also face a barrage of material stimuli, many with sexual messages attached. Sex bracelets and rainbow parties aren't nearly as prevalent as the media would have us believe, but there's a lot of sexual harassment that goes unnoticed in the hallways despite school awareness programs.

How Do You Teach Them?

They're distracted. They're addled. They're growing. So how do you go about educating them?

You can't rely on them to try, although they will when the material is presented in an engaging way. They'll try when they're allowed to figure things out for themselves without searching for the one right answer. And they'll try when they don't have to just sit there and copy from the overhead projector.

In middle school, learning has to be relevant. As Eric complained about his social studies lesson on the Bill of Rights: "How you gonna be a kid, only 13 years old, and sit there and listen to a teacher talk about nothing?" Eric would love to hear more about the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. If he had been taught there is a connection between the Bill of Rights and why we're fighting the Taliban, it wouldn't be "nothing" anymore.

You have to give them challenges and responsibilities. The idea that middle school has to be either a place of academic rigor or of nurturing is a false dichotomy. It must be both. Kids know when tasks are stupid; they know when the bar is set high. They are capable of deep thought. They hate goal-setting exercises, but they love to learn new things and show off their knowledge.

Caring Is the Key

Middle schoolers will try when they feel they are involved. They like to choose, to help set the rules, and to tutor each other. They want to feel they are being treated fairly. My cousin Noah, an eighth grader, feels alienated from school right now primarily because he senses a subtle prejudice from the adults there. It's true that he wears black clothing with spikes, holes, and safety pins. His clothes make him look ridiculous and intimidating, but the adults who take the time to know him realize he is neither.

For middle schoolers, comfort in school—connectedness, as it is called—comes from feeling that the adults there care about them. It may be hard to believe when you're bearing the brunt of a sixth grader's whining fit, but middle school students feel less conflict with their teachers and principals than they do with their family and friends.

Even when they don't admit it, it means a lot to them to please adults. Eric kept saying, "Nobody cares about me," and he called the principal an ogre behind her back. But when she summoned him to discuss his grades, he told her, "Thanks for caring." And nothing meant more to him than when his English teacher called his dad to say how well he did on a quiz. It really turned him around for a while. No matter how tough or jaded a kid is, I have never met one who wasn't thrilled—if only on the inside—with thoughtful gestures like these.

You want to tell middle schoolers they're going to be in high school soon and they won't have their hands held there. But there's a fine line between letting them fail and nudging them to success. Don't be easy on them. They've got to have responsibility, rigorous work, consequences, and some independence. Just don't forget that they still need your help and understanding. They need allies, not just educators.

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