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Middle School *and the* Age of Adjustment



A Guide for Parents

Eileen Bernstein



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Introduction

Sex. Drugs. Puberty. Algebra. These are just a few of the problems that parents have to worry about when their eleven-year-old walks through the doors of middle school. The eleven-year-old, meanwhile, has to be brave in a scary new world filled with constant change that creates self-doubt and emotional turmoil. The child has just come from fifth grade, king or queen of the hill, in a warm, sheltered environment. Now, in middle school, these new sixth graders are peewees on a school bus, sitting with teenage boys who may be shaving already and girls with well-developed bodies. The teenagers tell the sixth graders where to sit, and there is no choice because the older children are bigger and stronger.

I am a middle school counselor, and I have been helping these children make their way through this difficult emotional minefield. I have written this book for parents to describe this rapidly changing time and give advice to help in their child's adjustment. As a counselor and teacher for nearly thirty years, I have watched class after class of middle schoolers experience this very difficult period in their lives. Changes in our society have deeply affected these young adolescent boys and girls.

School buildings and their occupants have changed dramatically over the last half-century. In the 1940s and '50s, elementary schools were comprised of grades K–8, and children walked home for lunch. As the population grew in the country, junior highs for grades 7–9 were developed because elementary schools began to bulge at the seams. But a problem developed in the new junior highs: ninth graders did not take their grades seriously because they were still in junior high. This lack of ac

ademic seriousness can impact the overall grade point average, affecting college choice. In addition, high schools offer sports and other activities, which also enhance college entrance possibilities and could lead to scholarships. It is much better for high schools to include grades 9–12, so that students can be more serious about how their education affects their future educational choices.

Thus, high schools became grades 9–12, and many communities developed the intermediate school, which includes seventh and eighth grade, although some communities still had junior high schools. As the school age population mushroomed, the middle school, comprised of grades 6–8, was created. Now, sixth grade, which was formerly in elementary school, is combined with the seventh and eighth grades, a time when hormones quickly develop. Currently, this trend is growing. In the past few years, however, middle schools have come to be thought of as a middle child: difficult to understand, in need of attention (but what kinds of attention?), and extremely variable in behavior.

With the recent advent of terrible acts of violence in high schools and middle schools, it is important to understand who the middle school child is. Much has been written about adolescence, the journey from childhood to adulthood. But middle school children are young adolescents when they enter in sixth grade and full-blown adolescents when they leave in eighth grade. It is in middle school that social problems and painful rejection can occur. This can lead to the feeling of alienation that some high school children have felt when they have brought guns to school and killed their classmates.

The purpose of this book is to help parents understand the middle school child as he or she is growing up in a technological, media-obsessed, lack-of-extended-family society. Middle school children are a great risk today because they have unmonitored time to experiment with drugs and sex. However, whether you are a single parent or living in an intact marriage, you can have tremendous influence in guiding children successfully through these difficult and complex middle school years.

SERIOUS ISSUES OF EARLY ADOLESCENCE

1. There is an increase in unsupervised time between the end of school and the time that parents get home in the evening.
2. Many children are not comfortable reading and learning because they have been entertained excessively.
3. When children do not spend time doing homework and participating in enriching activities, they often feel bored.
4. There is early experimentation with sexual activity, to which children have been exposed in movies and on television.

5. There is easy access to alcohol and drugs accompanied by peer pressure to experience intoxication.
6. Because families are not located in the same community, there is a lessening of the strong family influence that existed in past generations.
7. Television may provide children with role models who do not inspire goal setting and achievement.
8. Our country has developed an emphasis on materialism as a main value, which creates a focus on short-term rewards and a need for more money.
9. Guns are easily purchased, which is causing some incidents of serious violence in the schools.
10. There is a lack of traditional values, such as honesty, helpfulness, and diligence, which give children meaningful goals and help them to monitor their own behavior.
11. There is an overall lessening of responsibility by parents to monitor and guide their children and by children to follow rules and to be good students.
12. There is a need for schools to take a more active role in helping children with their social and emotional problems.
13. Parents should find support systems in the neighborhood and the community to help monitor and guide their children.

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Chapter 1

Who Is a Middle School Child?

Do you remember the first three years of your child's life? He or she went from being a newborn to a walking, talking, I-have-my-own-ideas child.

You can draw a similar comparison with middle school children. They start out at the age of eleven, sixth grade, which used to be in elementary school. They enter sixth grade full of apprehension, encountering enormous change in their daily school lives.

One afternoon I went to talk about middle school to the fifth graders. I knew the one question that they would always ask: Do eighth graders stuff sixth graders in lockers? Of course, the children did not know that the lockers were not big enough and that the school disciplines students for aggressive behavior anyway.

The children were full of questions. What kind of food is sold in the lunchroom? What sports are played in physical education? How much homework is there? What do you do if the older kids pick on you at the bus stop? What kind of notebook should you have? What is a seven-period day like? Do you have to change in PE? They felt great excitement about coming to middle school, but they were also full of fears. I made sure to take a long time to try to allay their fears because I knew they had so many!

I vividly remember this experience:

The first day of school, Mrs. Floyd, the math teacher, brought Camille to my office. Camille was crying. After talking to Camille for a while and finding no

reason for the crying, I called her mother, but she had no explanation, either. Camille cried every day for two weeks. Then it stopped. She had finally adjusted to middle school. I know that some children take longer to adjust than others.

Middle school students leave at the age of thirteen or fourteen, full of raging hormones and having the answer to everything. The changes in those three years mirror the changes in the first three years of their lives because there are so many changes in such a short period of time.

Early adolescents experience tremendous changes in three areas of their lives: physical, social, and emotional. Take a look at sixth graders. A girl can be tiny, not having reached puberty, or she can be physically developed, looking like a sixteen-year-old. Puberty for girls can start as early as age nine—yes—or as late as age fourteen. A girl's strong interest in a boy often correlates with her physical development. More troubling is the fact that once a girl becomes physically developed, boys notice her and often make sexual comments, even to a nine-year-old. This can be very disturbing to a young girl, and she often does not know how to react appropriately. Parents of these girls must teach them to react to boys in an assertive manner by looking directly at them and telling them to stop, and to ask for help from school officials if comments and actions don't stop.

What about boys? They do not vary quite as much until they reach the age of twelve. Then they can be small, still boy-like, or they can be starting puberty with changes in their bodies and voices. Boys in middle school, until eighth grade, often do not care about their appearance. They have to be reminded to brush their teeth and take a shower. They often don't care what clothes they are wearing, dirty or clean. This can be very irritating to parents, who have higher standards. A sense of humor can be invaluable when this happens.

Go to a middle school dance and you will be amazed at how kids can range in appearance from children to adolescents. Girls are often taller than boys until eighth grade. Those who mature faster obviously develop a stronger interest in the opposite sex. The opposite sex may or may not return the interest.

At her first experience as a parent chaperone, Mrs. Jordan watched the children in amusement. She described to me how the younger children were running around in groups for the whole evening, talking and giggling. Some of the younger boys didn't even talk to the girls. A few eighth graders were dancing. They all really liked the group dances, and the children were myriad sizes and shapes. I knew that it was a lot of noisy activity and that high school dances looked very different from this.

As girls mature, they become obsessed with their bodies. Are they developing properly? Should they lie and tell other girls that they got their period? Their information about their own sexuality varies tremendously, depending on whether their mothers talk openly to them. Girls also are often prey to sexual harassment from boys and also from other girls. References are made to their breast size, and often their bra straps are pulled.

Barbara came to my office in tears. She was a well-developed girl who had reached puberty early. This was the second day of school and she said that on the bus, several boys offered her a dollar if she would let them touch her breasts. I had to let her cry for a while before I could begin to talk to her. Eventually, she became calmer. I tried to console her and explained that she was correct in coming to me. After we talked for a while, I called her mother. We would have to work on identifying the boys involved. I also suggested that she try to accompany the girls at the bus stop and on the bus. This would provide some protection.

Girls do not know what to make of this negative attention. Even though they may be taught that sexual harassment is wrong, they want to be noticed and popular, so they do not want to complain. They do not understand the line between flirting, which shows mutual interest, and sexual harassment, which is degrading and unwanted. So, students often are called to the office to answer claims of sexual harassment. The adults work with them daily to explain the difference between acceptable and inappropriate behavior.

Imagine this scene: As Mr. Baker was walking around the room, he saw that Kira looked upset. When he approached her desk, he saw that she was sitting in a small puddle of blood. Being a father of daughters, he knew immediately what had happened. He directed the entire class to leave the room to go to the library (the librarian had no idea, of course). He asked Kira to leave last and to turn out the lights, giving her an opportunity to go to the health room to get supplies for her first menstrual period.

Gym classes require that students change clothes so that sweaty clothing is not worn in the classroom. This means that children have to bring a change of clothing to school and take it home to be washed on a regular basis. This is another adjustment for many girls.

Kelly asked her English teacher if she could see me. She wanted to know if she could be allowed not to change for physical education, or PE. When I asked her why, she said that she was very embarrassed to take her shirt off in front of other people. I remembered what a PE teacher told me once: she could wear two

tee shirts to school and take off the top one in the locker room. Afterwards, she could change tops in the bathroom. She said that she would try this.

Just about all girls in middle school go through puberty. What about boys? They have a much longer span for their growth and change. Most boys begin to have observable major puberty changes starting in seventh grade. But they may complete their physical journey well into high school. Boys in middle school still retain their boyish characteristics. They like to run, to be physical. They seem to need to keep moving.

Mr. Michaels, assistant principal, always had to ask the sixth-grade boys to stop running as they were going to lunch. It was interesting how the eighth-grade boys did not run. The sixth graders were full of energy and they were very physical. The eighth graders were more interested in socializing. They would usually saunter to class.

Eighth grade marks the biggest change. Many boys are developed sexually, which makes eighth grade the hotbed of hormones:

Tim had been shy since he entered middle school. Sometimes a teacher would come to me because Tim did not want to give oral reports in class. I had worked with him over the years, having him practice in front of me, which helped. When he came to me in eighth grade about a PE problem, I was saddened by what he said. He hesitated to change clothes in eighth grade because now the boys were talking about who had the largest penis. Knowing that he would have to adjust to another challenge, I tried to make him see the situation in a humorous way, and to go along with the exaggeration of the boys. Meanwhile, I made a note to tell the PE teacher about the latest absurdity.

With the sexual messages and permissiveness that our society fosters today, eighth grade becomes the real time for risk-taking behaviors. Thus, in middle school the physical changes abound, creating a circus of sizes and shapes of development.

Next come the social changes. In elementary school, children usually have a set of friends that they have had for years. These friendships are often arranged by their parents either because of geographical desirability or because of specific interests. Girls in particular form fast friendships because they are very relationship-oriented. Boys tend to form relationships through sports, computers, or video games. Neighborhoods determine their friendships.

Middle school changes all of that. Often, two to three or more elementary schools converge to form a middle school. This means that everyone is meeting new classmates. Some of these new children are very popular or have a strong social presence. This sets the stage for changes in friendships, especially for girls. Even though there are cliques in ele-

mentary school, the cliques that form in middle school are stronger because there is increasing power over more classmates. It is always a challenge for me to talk to these girls and encourage them to understand the hurt feelings that often develop with these social problems.

Sarah was used to being a central figure in her fifth-grade class. But after a week in sixth grade, she saw that she had power not only over her friends and some new girls, but she was also popular with many seventh and eighth graders whom she knew in elementary school. After a month in middle school, some friends called her the “queen” of the school. She began to use her power in a negative way, demanding homework answers from the smart girls, who would then complain to me about the intimidation. Working with young adolescents who have new power in middle school requires a great deal of patience from the adults because they must explain the impact of behaviors to the children and maintain a policy of what is right and what is not acceptable.

Sometimes, girls become devastated as they watch their best friends moving away from them and forming new friendships. The socially stronger girls enlarge their influence and hang around new girls as the socially weaker girls watch them move away from them. This change and stress can bring verbal aggression in girls. One of the biggest problems in middle school arises when girls call each other foul names or spread vicious gossip about other girls. They often write notes to each other full name-calling words—“bitch” and “ho” are the biggest. Sometimes, they become excessively nasty and call a girl a lesbian. Then rumors spread, and some girls end up in tears.

Why do girls do this? This is their outlet of aggression as they form new pecking orders in a new social environment. Many girls become obsessed with this new, fluctuating social order, and some become depressed when they are left out.

When Charlene burst into tears because her best friend was ignoring her, I planned a conference where she could express her feelings about being left out of her friend’s new social group. Then I asked the friend to define the relationship as she wanted it to be. It was always a tricky conference to hold because you can’t force friendships on people. This time, the girls decided to keep their friendship, and Charlene agreed to make some new friends. I was relieved that the conference ended well, and I called Charlene’s mom. I told Charlene that I would do this.

How do boys change socially? Boys, too, are now introduced to other students from other schools. Boys’ popularity usually centers around athletic ability. Being good in sports gives boys a great sense of confidence. The opposite is true for the nonathletic boys. They often are teased, and they know that they are lacking an essential skill that makes

them popular in school. Boys also make changes in friendships, but not as dramatically as girls do. That is because boys usually have far fewer friends. Often two or three friends are par for boys. The social scene is set by eighth grade for the popular boys and girls to start to come together in risk-taking behaviors.

Lunchtime in middle school is a noisy, social arena. There are basic rules for behavior and cleanliness but there aren't enough adults to keep their eyes on the kids. In our old building, we had a single bathroom next to the lunchroom, and this had a lock on the inside. One day, the assistant principal happened to see Jodie and Mel leave the bathroom at the same time. Of course, they were immediately whisked up to the office. After being questioned separately, it was apparent that they were engaging in some kind of sexual activity. The principal decided to post one of the building service workers outside that bathroom in the future.

Basically, middle school is an arena for learning more complex social skills. Boys and girls are often awkward socially, and they often choose to say negative things to each other to avoid the feeling of awkwardness. They experiment with friendships with different people as they begin to see more choices in their lives. The axiom of taking two steps forward and one step back applies to the acquisition of social skills. You never know when a misunderstanding will develop between friends or children who are not friends. Meanwhile, all of the staff becomes involved as they are helping children to learn positive social skills. Whether it takes place in the administrator's office, the counselor's office, or the classroom, teaching acceptable behavior is a constant in middle school.

And what are the emotional changes that these physical and social changes bring about? It is the beginning of the roller coaster ride of emotions that middle school children experience. No one is immune to this. Imagine questioning yourself daily: do you look right, do you act right, did you say something stupid, are people looking at you, did you wear the right clothes today? Young adolescents begin the total self-absorption that will be a major characteristic of their lives until they reach adulthood. When parents ask questions and try to help, they may get a barrage of anger or a flood of tears—they cannot fathom how their child can change moods so rapidly.

When Sally came home from school and her mother asked her how her day was, Sally ran up the stairs crying and slammed the door as she went into her room. Sally's mom didn't know whether to try to comfort her or to wait until Sally became calmer. Sometimes Sally would not share what was bothering her, but other times she would be very open. The problem was always what someone said about her. And Sally listened to the gossip. She did not have the courage to confront the person who supposedly spread rumors about her, and she begged

her mother not to call me. Sally's mother never knew what the best thing to do was, so she just tried to make Sally feel better by planning an activity that Sally liked. Later, Sally's mom called me to share what had happened, and she asked me to keep an eye on her daughter to be sure that she was all right. I knew that "all right" would not last long because these problems continually resurface.

Sometimes, middle schoolers do not want to come to school, or they may develop stomachaches. If this is persistent, there could be serious adjustment problems, and the school counselor should be consulted.

Sandy was the second daughter of the Miller family. Her sister Alice had been my counselee, and she had few problems with middle school. Mrs. Miller was grateful for the good relationship that she and I had because Sandy was having a rough time adjusting to sixth grade. She had a lot of stomachaches and headaches, and she started to refuse to go to school. We had a long conference where I asked Sandy to tell me how she felt about school and what was difficult for her. We worked out a compromise where Mrs. Miller agreed to drive Sandy to school because the bus scene was the most difficult for her to deal with. I wanted Mrs. Miller to know that it was very important that she not allow Sandy to develop school phobia, which can be a challenge to treat.

All parents worry as they watch their children go through the pain of adjustment. A few children are spared the painful swing of emotions. Those children are usually born with very adaptive temperaments.

So, a middle schooler is a person who will enter sixth grade as a child, emerge two years later as an adolescent, and will go through tremendous changes. Sometimes, a child can change from day to day. Middle school is very exciting to most students, with the change to a seven-period day and more freedom. But they are also being weaned from one teacher who really cares to seven teachers who really care but have 150 students to care about. The physical, social, and emotional changes are always present in the mind of a middle school child. The requirements for adapting can be daunting. Throw in the higher academic requirements and the organizational responsibilities, and you will see children who are struggling to make sense of their world.

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Chapter 2

Adjustment to Sixth Grade

Sixth grade used to be in elementary school. That was a wonderful time for many children because there were certain privileges. You could be a patrol guard for the buses, or, even better, you could be a patrol captain. Some sixth graders raised and lowered the flag daily, and some did morning announcements.

In middle school, sixth grade is very different. Students change from having one elementary teacher at the beginning and end of the day, with, perhaps, another math or social studies teacher, to having seven teachers daily in middle school. The first-period teacher is not the last-period teacher. There is no one at the end of the day to remind children about what they need for the next day.

There are so many adjustments. Take lockers, for example. The first day of school, children have to be able to open a combination lock. If parents have not prepared them for this task, simple as it may be, it can be daunting to a new sixth grader and it may cause tears.

During the opening homeroom on the first day of school, the sixth-grade teachers were overwhelmed with calls for help from students who did not know how to open a combination lock. Even though there was a summer orientation at school, not all students attended, so some could not open a lock. They were so frustrated and scared! The teachers were used to this and went patiently from one student to another. I tried to help as much as I could, but my phone was ringing constantly with calls from parents who were worried about their sixth graders, and I needed to assuage their fears.

At age eleven, children now must adjust to seven teachers, seven personality types. Even if every teacher was a model of patience and helpfulness, adjusting to seven authority figures takes some time. For example, Mrs. A. may post the homework on the front board, and Mr. B. may post homework on the sideboard. As simple as this may sound, it is difficult for some eleven-year-olds to think expansively enough to adjust to this.

At our weekly team meetings, when the academic teachers and I met, we discussed student problems and parent concerns. Mrs. Lerner had called me about the difficulty that Martha had in writing down homework assignments. I decided to ask each teacher exactly when and where homework was posted. There certainly was no commonality in the process. Some teachers are more organized than others, and some math teachers may want to see how far they get in a period before deciding on homework. It is not a simple process. We brainstormed ideas to try to standardize the process to help the students.

One of the major challenges for these children is becoming well-organized. Now a notebook has five sections for their academic subjects. There may be an assignment book, a separate spiral notebook where students write down the homework. They also may use these notebooks for passes. Many children cannot find last night's homework, or they leave their books in the locker when they go home because they do not remember that they have homework in a specific subject. Parents become so frustrated because they saw Johnny doing his math homework, yet they got a call from the teacher saying that the homework was not turned in.

Mrs. Adams called me to ask if there was someone who could check Johnny's backpack at the end of the day to be sure that all of his books were there. Unfortunately, with 300 students in the sixth-grade class, there was no one who could check each of the 300 students at the end of the day. Some parents had a difficult time adjusting to the fact that their child had to become organized and responsible. They missed that hand-holding that elementary school teachers give. Sometimes, parents are rude to the school staff because there is not a quick solution to this problem. I tell parents that I will let the teachers know of their concern about their child and that home help in organization skills is a must.

One of the pleasures for athletic middle school children is that they have physical education every day. But this, too, brings adjustments. They must have their own combination lock to put on their gym locker because they must change clothes for gym. This requires memorizing two locker combinations. They have to remember to bring their gym clothes and to take them home to be washed as well. Sometimes, there is a trek from the gym to their next class, where a tardy could give them

a lunch detention. More changes! Some children have difficulty changing clothes in front of others, but if they don't change clothes, their grade drops. The students who are not athletic encounter more teasing. The PE class can be a positive or negative experience. Parents need to know all of these details about middle school so that they can work with teachers to solve problems.

In fact, change is the name of the game in sixth grade. While the children are adjusting on a daily basis in the beginning, they are bringing home their excitement, fears, and concerns, and the new teachers, counselors, and administrators are just getting to know these children and their parents. There are always special needs cases, such as children with attention deficit disorder (ADD) or those who are learning disabled. All of the adults are communicating to help the children, but it takes time for all to get to know and understand each other.

Mrs. Baker called the first week of school. She wanted to be sure that Billy was sitting in the front of all of his academic classes and that the teachers knew of his needs. He had a 504 Plan, which is a document that gives accommodations to children who have a specifically documented condition that interferes with learning or other major life functions. Billy was easily distracted, and he needed the teacher to help him focus on the assignment. The only problem for the teachers was that several other students in their classes had ADD, and there were only so many front seats. I told Mrs. Baker that I would remind the teachers of this accommodation.

An interesting phenomenon occurs in sixth grade. Sometimes, elementary teachers report that a specific child has been a behavior problem. When that child enters sixth grade, he or she may love the constant change of classes and teachers, and there may be no behavior problem. However, a child who thrived with one teacher's special attention in elementary school may become a behavior problem in sixth grade because he or she needs that special attention. What this really shows is that you cannot predict how any sixth grader will adjust. And since middle school is full of change, from year to year any student may become more or less successful socially or academically.

Mrs. Lowden, an English teacher, asked me to find out about Mary. For several weeks Mary had been almost clinging to her. Mary would ask questions after class every day and she would raise her hand often during class work to ask for extra help. I called Mary's elementary counselor and found that she always had been placed in the smallest classes possible because she was very insecure about her work. Her mother appeared to be a hypercritical person who put a lot of pressure on Mary. When I explained that to Mrs. Lowden, she said that she would try to be patient in getting Mary to be more independent.

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