

Living With and Teaching Young Adolescents: A Teacher's Perspective

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The middle level years are an extraordinary period of our human development. The only other time we grow as much physically, emotionally, and intellectually is from ages zero to two. But early adolescence is much more than just tripping over large feet and calling friends on the phone to discuss who likes whom. The ways we deal with conflict, relationships, and personal development as adults have direct connections to specific experiences we had between the ages of ten and fourteen. We can create a very positive future, then, when we provide careful and compassionate experiences for today's young adolescents.

The Truth About Young Adolescents

One of my middle school students is the oldest in her family. She cooks dinner and does laundry for her young siblings because both parents work at night. She also bathes her siblings and puts them to bed before starting on her homework. Last year, another student coordinated the building of an elevated sidewalk through a mud pit at the back entrance to a local school. In May, one of my students raised over \$22,000 for the National Juvenile Diabetes Foundation. Other students at my school came in second for having the most soda cans recycled. Several students performed the National Anthem at a regional swimming Olympics program attended by thousands. One seventh grader was a volunteer performer at a Virginia plantation re-enactment, and another was an opera singer who performed at the Kennedy Center.

Bragging? You bet. The great thing is that anyone who works with middle schoolers can probably make the same claims about students in their area of the nation. In transition from child to adult, these morphing humans are amazing doers and thinkers. Their comments can be profound, pithy, honest, absurd, and juvenile, all at the same time. They reveal developing wisdom, deep understanding, free spirit, and are a generation of thinkers in the making. They are a far cry from the inept persona some journalists assign to this stage of human development.

With good reason, my wife and I ask middle school students to baby-sit our six and seven-year-old children rather than most high school students. Why? Young adolescents are ceaselessly conscientious. They are not apathetic in positions of trust. Doing the right thing matters to them. They want to be taken seriously so badly that they go overboard to make sure they are perceived as responsible. When I've taught students who had challenges at home or personal problems such as diabetes, other middle school students are often the most mature and tender sources of help.

The young adolescents in my school can analyze news articles that disparage their age group using logical fallacies such as false dichotomies or emotional appeal arguments. They can analyze President Hoover's political actions with big business during his term of office and compare them to today's issues with the Microsoft court case. They can determine the exact amount of paint needed to completely cover an L-shaped office building minus the spaces for doors and windows. They can prepare entire multi-media presentations with proper presentation etiquette and student-enhanced digital photography worthy of any corporate boardroom. They can run their own television studios, and they can speak and sing in front of thousands. They can also tell you what personal pronoun is third person, plural, objective case.

In the next breath, however, young adolescents can be absurd, on purpose or by accident. Tough kids get their braces stuck in classroom pillows or glue their armpits so they can't raise their arms without ripping

hair, both of which recently happened in my classroom. Seemingly sophisticated students laugh until they cry when someone passes gas during a test, and they all ask questions that were answered four seconds earlier. They get dramatic about budding romance, and they bump up against the rules society has imposed on them and have to face the consequences. Those of us who work with middle schoolers delight in seeing the world through their eyes. It keeps everything fresh. Our classes are full of humans in the making and we have a front row seat as coaches and referees. Never, however, do we use student indiscretions and confusions to paint the whole picture of the charges before us.

Numerous young adolescents who gave me nothing but frustration and less than acceptable work in their middle school years went on to become wonderful students in high school and college. Somewhere inside them they were germinating the seeds of what they could become. With each one, we look past the frustrating years, and we do not hold their current state of development against them. What would we have become if we had been held to the labels placed on us as young adolescents? We're farmers who trust that the crop will produce, even before the first seed has sprouted.

Though their accomplishments are often exceptional, most middle schoolers cannot be held accountable for adult-level expertise and expression, either. For example, I can't compare their first attempts at technical writing to that of accomplished technical writers in the field. We can barely do that with accomplished high schoolers. Nor can I get angry over their inability to express themselves coherently. They're closer to being children than they are to being adults. It was relatively recently that they were sleeping with the light on while wearing their favorite super hero pajamas, stuffed animals lining the beds. They laugh when people trip, and their tongues become lead when someone on whom they have a crush walks by. To expect them to perform at adult levels is cruel. We're there to do everything possible to ensure their success, not to critique inadequacies.

So How Are They Different?

As adults we sometimes forget that most young adolescents:

- don't remember a world with anything other than Windows 95 or 98 or a Pentium processor
- have not known a time without mini-vans
- assumed there has always been an African American and a woman Supreme Court Justice
- have never known movie tickets to be less than \$6 or \$7.00
- don't know what freshly run ditto paper smells like
- have no meaningful recollection of the Reagan era or the Persian Gulf War
- weren't even alive when the space shuttle blew up
- have never known the world without AIDS
- don't understand the expression, "you sound like a broken record"
- think that roller-skating has always meant inline
- think that the Vietnam War is as ancient history as World War I or even the Civil War.

Young adolescents are physiologically different from adolescents and those in late childhood. They undergo rapid physical, intellectual, and moral growth. They move from concrete to abstract thinking, and from absurdity to rationality, and back again. They deal with tremendous pressures from peers, parents, and society, all the while searching for identity, purpose, security, and acceptance. These shifts produce strong emotions. Acting out, feeling hurt, defining authority by defying it, and alternating between being a child and being an adult all create situations that demand guidance from compassionate adults who have lived through those phases. Young adolescents crave:

- positive social interaction with adults and peers
- structure and clear limits
- physical activity
- creative expression
- competence and achievement
- meaningful participation in families, school and communities, and
- opportunities for self-definition.

If we don't meet these needs at home and at school, young adolescents will become alienated, lack self-esteem and a sense of belonging, and choose destructive methods of coping, including delinquency and drugs. Early adolescence is the last point of effective intervention before their reversible downward spiral toward self-destruction that can occur if we do not provide developmentally responsive learning environments for these students. Children between the ages of ten and fourteen do not need either the protected coddling of elementary school nor the alienating subject departmentalization of high school. They need a bridge between the two levels, something that is age appropriate, focusing on unique intellectual, social, emotional, moral, and physical needs. Young adolescents are forging autonomy and identity. Their physical changes are so rapid, they often don't have time to adjust. Discomfort or embarrassment occur. They are needy, moving from extreme egotism to thoughtful humility. They are champions for what is fair to the point where that's all that matters in some conversations. And just to make it exciting, they are all maturing at different rates with varying degrees of intensity.

Parents and Schools Working with Young Adolescents

Today's middle school classrooms can include students' parents in every step of the middle school experience. Current technology, innovation, and invitations improve upon yesterday's middle school approaches to parent communication. We're only on the first rung of a ladder to many new opportunities for parent-teacher communications. On-line posting services are one of the most amazing phenomena to hit middle schools in the past few years. Teachers can post daily, weekly, and monthly homework, tests and quizzes, project directions, maps, student work, vocabulary lists, chalkboard notes, and much more.

Moms and Dads should realize their continuing - but different - role. Don't let the middle school years be the time to let your child "fly solo." Some parents back off from their children's lives when their children enter middle school, claiming that their children need to meet consequences on their own, good or bad. Experience and collective wisdom from those who've passed this way before, however, all disagree. Early adolescence is a time to actually increase parental involvement, not reduce it. Parents wouldn't stop mid-stride from teaching 11-month-old Kenny how to walk when he was a toddler; they shouldn't back off from helping him develop strong character and academic success in his early adolescence. It's important for young adolescents to know that an adult's being in their presence is time well spent. It's affirmation that they count for something.

Educating and Raising Healthy Young Adolescents

Eighty percent of all jobs our students will one day hold haven't been invented yet. Experts say, in fact, that the overall amount of knowledge that exists is doubling every ten to twelve months, whereas it used to double every decade, then every few years. Futurists add that current young adolescents might commonly live to be 120. Our young adolescents do not need teachers who see themselves solely as dispensers of all there is to know about particular subjects. They need dynamic adults offering a solid core of current knowledge but ones who create the ability and inclination to learn more in the years ahead. We have to respond to an evolving future before it happens. John W. Gardner was right when he said, "All too often we

are giving young people cut flowers when we should be teaching them to grow their own plants." Content preparation isn't enough. Benjamin Franklin once said, "Tim was so learned that he could name a horse in the nine languages, [but] so ignorant that he bought a cow to ride on." Future employers and the community want more than individuals who can cite facts and figures. Companies want employees who can also self-educate, solve problems, anticipate needs, collaborate with others, think for themselves, and behave ethically.

The modern middle school approach has developed four important components that distinguish it from the traditional junior high school.

First, it incorporates some form of an advisory program so that every student is a part of a small group of students (less than 20) assigned to an advisor. Such a program develops close relationships between students and adults, gives them a sense of belonging and an advocate.

Second, it features interdisciplinary teaming wherein a core of academic teachers is assigned to the same group of students. These teachers have a common planning period, so they are able to respond collaboratively to the needs of individual students, meet jointly with parents, and design instructional units that relate the subjects to one another and to life.

Third, they utilize varied approaches to instruction in conducting a rigorous curriculum that also addresses students' own questions and focuses upon real life issues, calling for their active engagement in problem-solving while mastering fundamental knowledge and skills. Lots of hands-on activities are possible in a flexible block schedule under the direction of the team. Service projects and varied learning strategies meet their needs for creative expression and meaningful participation in our communities.

Finally, they include exploratory programs and enrichment experiences that capitalize on the innate curiosity of young adolescents, exposing them to a wide range of academic, vocational, and recreational subjects for career options, community service, and enrichment. Here they may discover aptitudes, talents, interests that will impact the rest of their lives. Exploratory areas include foreign languages, home and family living, technological arts, music, art, speech, drama, careers, consumer education, creative writing, intramurals, interest clubs, and other activities.

Middle school teachers are committed both to young adolescents and to their subject area. They have very high expectations for all students, not just those who show promise early on. They assess learning authentically, frequently, and in such a manner as to diagnose and teach, not just document deficiencies. They find academic and physical competitions for students to enter then coach them on how to study. They teach them how to cope with disappointment and with success, give them positions of real responsibility, and require them to do some things in which they are not entirely sure of themselves, standing by their sides every step of the way. They affirm positive risk-taking and include everyone who wants to participate. All students who want a speaking part in this year's Shakespeare play, for instance, receive one, even if it means we have to split a longer speech into two speeches.

Attitude can turn a blob of sand into King Arthur's castle. The reality is that teachers and parents of young adolescents teach more by what they are than by what they say. Young adolescents often do not separate the teacher from his or her attitude - the teacher is the attitude. Students are looking for hope. The adults in their lives inspire them to do the right thing. They exemplify the virtues they teach. They model making a

positive contribution to the world and being of service to others. They strive to merit respect. And they enjoy themselves while doing it! Good spirit is contagious.

Assessment and Accountability for Young Adolescents

Middle school teachers are judicious in how time is spent in the classroom. They do things with young adolescents that can only be done when everyone is together. They don't waste precious time on activities that can be done at home or ones that enable teachers to grade papers while students do busy work. Accountability pervades the whole middle school concept. Because we are so committed to becoming aware of student strengths and areas for improvement, then taking specific action and establishing high, rigorous goals as a result of that knowledge, today's middle school is far more demanding than yesterday's junior high school ever was. The use of authentic and alternative assessments alone qualifies for intense accountability towards a high standard. The feedback and responsibility are clearly delineated. Students and teachers are pushed towards excellence, not mediocrity.

When being assessed, young adolescents respond well to real audiences. When someone "in the outside world" witnesses middle school students' efforts, they become highly motivated. For instance, I get nearly 100 percent participation from all 140 of my students on our class literary magazine when they know those magazines will be displayed in hospital and dentist waiting rooms across our community. Whenever possible, middle schools and parents should use real audiences for middle schoolers' work - real scientists can review student science projects; members of the community can review student literary and news magazines in offices; the town historian can give feedback on student community histories; and a local landscaper can work with students to landscape their school grounds. If they know their science essays or art projects might be hanging in the local Jiffy Lube or the dentist's office, students become accountable to their community, friends, and family. They put more effort into achieving the high standards we've set.

As we assess young adolescents, we use frequent and formative feedback. Good assessment of young adolescents' work should never be saved for the end of a unit. We evaluate along the way, giving students feedback on their performance while they're learning. Football coaches don't wait until the football game is over to tell their players what they were doing wrong. An end-of-unit grade on a six-week project does little to motivate young adolescents. Multiple confirmations of success or redirection motivate students, however. Peer critiques, self-critiques, and think-alouds motivate students.

Much of a young adolescent's academic success is influenced by abilities in reading comprehension. Reading comprehension, however, has more to do with students' background and readiness than it does with the mere ability to decode or define words. Teachers and parents who want students to understand and remember concepts spend time creating background experiences prior to intense study. Before giving students a reading assignment, for example, we can show them pictures or video excerpts to provide context. We can ask them to role-play, hear testimonials, watch demonstrations, listen to stories, do simulations, or participate in a relevant field trip. The reverse is true as well: Before we take them on a field trip, students do several readings about their destination so that they have a readiness to benefit from the location. The idea is to create some familiarity about content before engaging in it at a challenging level. If done, young adolescents remember the material and can use it intelligently.

In today's middle schools, we try to fulfill Oscar Wilde's declaration that the goal of every teacher is to put himself out of a job. Good teachers and parents of young adolescents find ways for everyone to experience depth and competence, no matter where their standardized test scores fall. No one is left to the shallows, and no young adolescent will be considered less than worthy of intellectual challenge.

Conclusion

Teaching young adolescents is one of the most demanding and rewarding jobs in life. We must apply extremely varied instructional strategies in concert with substantive content and skills, all while navigating hormonal storms and identity expeditions from humans at their most awkward stages. The mental dexterity and commitment to excellence of middle school teachers is beyond reproach. Middle school teachers are on the front lines, shaping a very real tomorrow.

I love being on those front lines. Teaching young adolescents is a combination of serving in the Peace Corps, organizing an amoebae circus, competing in the Decathlon, being a salesman, and vying for an Academy Award. In no other job do you laugh aloud, ignite someone's imagination, bring peace, pose conflict, kiss frogs, quell fears, affirm goodness, stand amazed, and read a crumpled love note that assures the end of the world by 3:00 that afternoon. And that's just the end of first period. I wouldn't miss it for anything. After teaching for two decades, I believe that the world is going to be a better place for these individuals' substantive contributions. Middle school teachers are the bridge between the past, present, and future, not just the bridge between elementary and secondary levels. We are many things to many people, but most of all, we, along with their parents, are the significant others in the lives of these vulnerable young people.

Want to really affect the future? Spend time with a young adolescent.

While reflecting on his life as a father of a young adolescent at 2:00 a.m. one weekday last year, a father wrote the following letter to his child's middle school team:

"Watching my son grow up is so bittersweet. My influence is waning fast, my conversations with him increasingly are—I don't know—inconclusive. I compare my interactions with my 13-year-old to my interactions with my 7-year-old. With my younger son, I dominate his entire horizon; with Matt, I'm mostly just blocking his view of the TV set.

Is this his form of self-protection? Is he insulating himself from me? It's easy to imagine the worst, to view this egocentrically, and think this is about me. It's not, I know. But still it's important to me to want to be a central part of his life. So I flip-flop between casual, superficial stuff and wanting to talk about 'big stuff'. The former have become easier and more comfortable while the latter have become more strident and ineffective.

I can tell by a glance how receptive he might be to my attempts to pull him back into my world. If I time it right, I can catch him open-minded early on a weekend morning with the offer of a trip to McDonald's. Sometimes, we get into serious discussions then—but always he draws the invisible bounds around his world, and cordons off certain things he reserves for himself.

I've come to learn, as I'm sure millions of parents have before me, that his world and mine no longer overlap the way they once did, and that it's OK. I've learned that Matt having his own world, distinct from mine, is a critical part of his development as a person. Invading it is not okay. As a parent, I have an obligation to protect him even when it is the last thing in the world he thinks he may need. But in order to protect him, I have to know what's going on in his world. No wonder parents fill their kids' schedules with sports and music lessons! It's totally about trying to control their world, to shape it in a certain direction one feels comfortable with. And the line between this control being acceptable and dysfunctional is hard to define and varies from child to child.

Anyway. It's late at night, and I set out to make a point in far fewer words than I've already written. My point was this, that I subconsciously let go of a lot of my need to understand everything about his world outside of my own after the first few times I visited his middle school. Much more than with his elementary school, I feel like I have partially turned over the reins of his development to his middle school teachers and staff. I intuitively trust the school to be as caring, as concerned, as supportive and attentive with Matt as we have been as parents.

It is the natural order of things that he separate himself from us somewhat at this point in his life, to go about the difficult business of finding himself. By letting go, by giving him freedom to explore, I see he relaxes, and I can occasionally feel him reaching back to make sure I am still there. And every once in a while, among the casual responses I get to my attempts to hug him, he'll hug with me back with such a fierceness that it brings tears to my eyes, and I know we're going to be fine. Thanks, Matt's middle school teachers, for being such a key part of Matt's extended family, his community, and his parenting. There are few I would trust with such an important-to-me role, fewer still who could pull it off so well." — John, parent of a middle school student