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Middle School Child - Growing Up Isn't Easy

Your children are attempting in their own, be it in a rather clumsy way, to grow up and be independent--independent of you and other adults. Peers at this time are the most important people in their lives. It is, for example, difficult for them to believe that they will ever appreciate their brothers, sisters, parents, and teachers. They are receiving signals from their peers and they react accordingly.

These students are past the consistent ages in which behavior was quite predictable--ages when they wanted to please parents and teachers more than anything. Pleasing peers becomes most important. It begins to happen with different children at different times. Gesell's book, written in 1956, calls age eleven, the beginning of the inconsistent years. Although there are children who go through the adolescent years without a great deal of difficulty, for many adolescents and their parents and teachers, these years may be described as the troublesome, exciting, changing, turbulent, unsettling, fidgety, and boisterous years.

Most of the problems at this age are not academic, but instead social and organizational. Middle school students may do their homework and then forget to hand it in, but they won't forget when they need to telephone a friend. Some people say that it seems as if the brain stops growing while the body takes off and the hormones kick in. Students are so concerned with peers that school and families take a back seat. Problems that we adults pass off as silly, are often "life and death"

matters to students this age.

Although this is a difficult time for students and parents, your children will grow out of it. Signs of maturation are evident throughout the middle school years. By Grade Nine many students are, as teachers and parents might phrase it, "Back to Almost Normal." Some adolescents, however, take longer than others on their journey to maturity.

Just so you will not feel alone in your struggle to understand your adolescent, here are some typical situations school administrators and teachers face every day.

Example: Two teachers come to the principal to talk about students. One suggests the principal observe the class to attempt to help find out why a student is not doing good work. The other asks what to do because a student has requested that the teacher hand out party invitations. Not all the students are invited.

The student having the party comes to the office saying that the party invitations have not been distributed. The administrator explains to the child that it is a problem when several of the students have not been invited to a party. "Wouldn't it hurt your feelings," asks the principal, "if you weren't invited?" The administrator suggests that the student's mother call or write to the students who will be invited. The administrator and the student talk about parties and invitations. The administrator asks the student how the one or two who weren't invited will feel if talk about the party goes on in front of them.

The administrator observes the 7th grade class that has the student who is no longer going good work. This is a girl who has always done well in school. The administrator watches the class; the girl watches a boy sitting across the aisle.

Example: A student comes to a teacher asking to do special projects. The student wants some of his classmates, but not others, to be invited to work on it with him.

Example: A girl from Grade Six comes in to the office crying. "I'm the one who really loves him," she says about a sixth grade boy, "and he told Stephanie he would be her boyfriend!" It takes the principal about 35 minutes to calm her down.

Example: Two boys are sent to the principal because they knocked books out of some girls' arms. The girls come too. They say the boys hate them and are bothering them. The principal talks to the boys. The girls are calling them names, they say, but teachers don't catch the name callers. It turns out that the boys like the girls, and the girls like the boys.

Example: An eighth grader comes to a teacher asking that the teacher keep a boy away from her. "He is really a pain," she says. "He calls me every night and my parents aren't happy. He follows me around and says mean things." The two students are in a play and are often backstage. Throughout the play practices, 3:30 to 5:00 each day the teacher attempts to keep an eye on them. The girl flirts with the boy. The boy follows the girl. The teacher follows the boy. The girl looks at the teacher as if she is crazy. Several weeks after the play, the girl asks to talk to the teacher privately. She does not mention the boy. She wants the teacher to help her evaluate her goals for the rest of her life.

Example: A teacher talks to fourth grade girls about girl nastiness. They say they have all experienced it. "What do I do," one says, "when I want to be friends with someone and my best friend says, "If you are friends with her, you can't be friends with me?" With the 4th graders, the teacher talks about secrets, best friends, and whisperers. Everybody thinks the others talk about them. Someone says she has a problem because her hair is too straight and her mother won't get her a perm.

Example: Three Fifth Graders come to the principal about the "Cool Girls Table." "The cool girls won't let us sit at their table," they say. The principal asks if they want to be with the cool girls. They say, "Yes." The principal asks why they want to be with others who are mean. "Why not be friends with the others?" The girls want, however, to be in the cool group. "The cool girls don't like us," they tell the principal. The principal talks with the cool girls alone. They think the 'Uncool' don't like them. The principal brings the two groups together and asks them to tell each other what they told the principal. They are amazed.

Example: Several boys come to the office complaining about another boy who is too serious about a game in physical education. "He always has to win," they say. "Do you like to win," the principal asks? "Did you win today?"

Example: A girl wanders in after school to talk to a teacher. "I've been meaning to tell you," she says, "because I saw Mary and Kimberly in the mall and they didn't speak to me. I think it's because I don't wear a bra."

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