

## MIDDLE SCHOOL SURVIVAL - IT'S A WEIRD THING

For many children, middle school becomes a pressure cooker filled with power struggles, conflicting impulses, physical growth and strong emotions. At the same time, middle-school students develop deep and close friendships, separating from their families and forming their own rewarding social universes.

One of the best things you can do for your child is not to assume they are, by nature, over-dramatic, mean, or gossipy. Expectations matter! Appreciate and support your child's best impulses, praise them when they take risks, especially if they involve going against the social tide, support their individuality, and downplay concerns about what other people think.

Encourage them to be friends with a wide spectrum of people (without forcing the issue), and always, always assume the best! Middle school is challenging.

**Here are some ideas about middle school ups and downs and what parents can do to help.**

**There's a lot that's cool about middle school.** While much is written about “mean” students, it's important for parents to realize how much fun this time can be socially for their child. In seventh and eighth grades, students get excited about becoming preteens and having their own world. It's a time when they develop their own set of interests and begin to think about the world around them.

**The nature of friendship changes in middle school.** At this stage, when students get together what they mostly do is talk. They talk in person about music, sports, clothes and each other -- and then they talk online. Some parents get frustrated because they don't get to hear their child talk the way they did when they were in elementary school. But finding ways to connect with your child outside their social lives is extremely important.

**The social media can set the tone for middle school.** Students this age are thrilled that they are about to become teenagers. There is a whole cultural pulse that taps into what they are thinking and feeling, and (like it or not) it's really irresistible. Students live their lives online, doing homework, watching TV, and talking to friends simultaneously. While they can use the Internet in wonderful ways, they can sometimes use it to flame and shame each other, spread vicious rumors, and post malicious information behind students' backs. Watching what goes on in cyber-space is extremely important. Facebook and other social media can have dire consequences as cyber bullying can severely injure a child making it impossible to move forward and establishing lasting friendships.

**Hormones can affect behavior in middle school.** It's hard to be a child at this age and stage. Hormones make many students feel edgy, crabby, cranky, and teary. Everyone's bodies are developing and changing at different rates and this often makes students feel uncomfortable with their own body. Raging hormones and interest in each other can also disrupt the existing social order. When boys/girls hit the scene it can be tough to sort out just how to interact in the same old way with friends. By the time your child is 10 or 11, it might be time to open a conversation regarding relationships. When your child mentions the opposite sex, don't immediately jump to the possible attraction between them. It might or might not be there.

**The social hierarchy intensifies in middle school.** Cliques get cliqueier, the need to be in power intensifies, and students can get nasty and much of this behavior stems from the intense desire to belong, the need to feel powerful, and the conditioning that many students have to not express their feelings directly. Some students function as leaders, others as followers, and the rest live outside the groups. Some of these students don't care, while others desperately want to belong. Keeping communication open and candid about affirming who they are and what they uniquely bring to the social setting can alleviate many of these feelings.

