

Working with Middle and High School Friends: What Are the Developmental Differences?

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[The ideas expressed in this article are a culmination of views from various developmental psychologists and educators. Specifically referenced are: Scales, Wiles & Bondi, Pikunas, and Erikson, among others. Other comments are a result of personal experience from working in middle and high schools and parenting three children.]

Middle school and high school Friends represent two entirely different groups in terms of developmental needs. The former (roughly grades 6th through 8th) are young adolescents entering a stage of rapid and volatile growth driven by raging hormones. As they leave the quiet and protected years of childhood, they begin a transition into adulthood. Yet, these years are marked with awkwardness, confusion, and uncertainty. Fortunately, as high school begins, their bodies adjust to the dramatic physical changes and their emotional roller coaster starts to settle. In the later teen years (roughly grades 9th through 12th), the discomforts diminish, and they begin to blossom into an adult identity. Let's take a closer look at the developmental stages of each group, beginning with the young adolescents we call middle schoolers.

Only recently have the middle school years been given sufficient attention by developmental psychologists and educators. The term “transescence” describes this rapid transition from child to adult. Physical development accelerates with increases in weight, height, heart size, lung capacity, and muscular strength. Bones grow faster than muscles and their supporting tendons, often resulting in a lack of coordination and awkwardness. Extremities—arms, hands, feet, noses, and ears—tend to grow faster leading to self-consciousness and embarrassment. Cowlicks, pimples, and changes in voice add to the problem. Hormone imbalances cause acne, allergies, and body odor. Metabolism fluctuates from restlessness to listlessness. The “transescent” tires more easily. To confound matters, these overwhelming changes start at a different time and at a different rate for different individuals, and girls tend to mature physically a year or two sooner than boys. Within the same grade level and gender, weight can vary by as much as 80 pounds and height by 2 feet!

Emotions are also erratic. Feelings may shift from superiority to inferiority, from comfort to oversensitivity, and from assurance to fear and anxiety. The chemical and hormonal imbalances seemingly shift from one hour to the next, bouncing behavior from child-like at one extreme to quite mature at the other. Just when you start treating the “transescent” like an adult, he or she may act very much like a child and vice-versa.

With all these rapid physical and emotional spurts, brain growth tends to slow with a gradual shift from concrete thinking to abstract, independent, and critical thinking. “Transescent” learners prefer active to passive learning and want to interact with peers during learning activities. Often they will argue to the end to convince others of their egocentric, and sometimes off-base, views.

The social focus development for the “transescent” broadens from family to peer group. Middle schoolers tend to sacrifice their own individual preferences and styles for acceptance into a peer group. Fads in clothes, speech, mannerisms, and music tend to define choices and actions. “Puppy love” can shower extreme devotion to one person, yet it can be transferred almost overnight to another.

Despite the importance of peers, however, adults and the family are still the authoritative and stabilizing force. This is the vital distinction between the middle and high school years. Some refer to these “transescent” years as “the last best chance” that adults have to exert their guidance and influence over these children.

So, what are key elements in working with the middle school aged youngster? Developmental psychologists and educators suggest these: (1) positive social interactions with adults and peers, (2) structure and clear limits, (3) physical activity, (4) creative expression, (5) competence and achievement, (6) meaningful participation in families, schools, and communities, and (7) opportunities for self-definition.

In contrast, let us turn to the older, high school aged, teen. After the whirlwind of “transesence,” older adolescents seem to settle down, at least in terms of physical growth and emotional independence. Growth slows and hormones balance out. Older teens begin to accept their physiques as somewhat set, though appearance is frequently influenced by the chosen fashion, hairstyle, or cosmetics of the peer group. In addition, the behavior of later teens is more consistent and self-regulated. Gone is the erratic back and forth from child-like to adult emotional reactions. Suddenly, they act and feel “grown up” and may take offense when asked, “Where are you going?” or “What have you been doing?”

Attaining emotional independence and overcoming family dependence is now the driving force. Older teens want to be adults and want others to see them as such. Often this “breaking away” is emotionally charged. Authority figures, especially parents, can be resented and resisted. Even within close families and loving parent/child relationships, teenagers must establish their own independent identity and sense of autonomy in an adult world.

Teen interests expand in a variety of personal, social, and cultural contexts. Finding role models with whom to identify helps develop self-identity, though it can sometimes become focused, narrow, and fixated. Introspection and egocentric tendencies intensify. Concern for oneself can overshadow concern for parents, siblings, and friends. Self-control is strengthened by developing internal values and principles. Questions like, “Who am I?” and “What kind of person would I like to be?” are important. Fantasies, daydreaming, and personal exploration nurture a personal view of life.

Older teens refine their interpersonal skills by sharing their personal experiences, especially within their peer group. Topics include relationships, music and movies, sports and TV shows, sex and morals, parents and teachers, money and status, and popular celebrities. Dating, as well as socializing in groups, helps to establish close relationships and cultivates tact and social graces. Frequent dating sometimes leads to intimacy, love, and sexual exploration.

In contrast to the middle schooler, then, the teen of high school age has a different set of developmental needs. These include: (1) attaining emotional independence, (2) accepting one's adult physique as final and set, (3) improving social skills in wider contexts, (4) developing self-fulfillment, (5) internalizing a "philosophy of life," and (6) moving toward self regulation and internal controls. From the volatile changes in growth and dependence on adults, the older teen evolves physically and emotionally into an independent and self reliant adult.

As First Day School teachers and as parents, we often forget these basic developmental needs and differences between middle and high school aged Friends. Too often we misunderstand or ignore their significance. Yet, their expression is both inevitable and necessary if our young Friends are to pass successfully from childhood to adulthood. Recognizing these stages can be particularly valuable and reassuring to adults in understanding behavior; planning curriculum and activities; and accepting a young Friend's growth as a natural, though sometimes bumpy, process.

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