

A MIDDLE SCHOOL SURVIVAL GUIDE

**PRESENTED BY MR. MIKE SIMONS
MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER
AIKEN CHRISTIAN SCHOOL**

Dear Young People in Middle School and Your Families,

Warm and wonderful, bewildering, sometimes scary, silly and exciting! Do any of these words describe your life today? The middle school years—more than during any other stage of life—are filled with dramatic changes in life experiences, body changes, intellectual growth, and emotional expansion.

Thinking of issues in your lives, this Middle School Survival Guide is presented in an effort to provide information, to introduce topics you may want to discuss, and to recognize in print some of the wonderful and difficult realities you might encounter in your personal and family lives.

A philosopher told parents that we can give you our love but not our thoughts, for you have your own thoughts. We can try to be like you, but we shouldn't aim to make you like us, because life moves on, and you are like arrows that spring from us into the future. May your todays and tomorrows hold stimulating challenges, strengths—giving, fulfillment, love, and happiness. We, your Aiken Christian School, strive to stay in tune with you, to help you, and to cheer you on with admiring and hopeful hearts.

With best wishes,

Mr. Mike Simons
Middle School teacher
Aiken Christian School

Education World® - Curriculum: Fifty Great Things About Middle Schoolers!

No age is more maligned than ten- to fourteen-year-olds! So Education World went right to the source -- to middle school teachers -- to learn what's so great about this group. The dedication and the humor of middle school educators shines through in their list of FIFTY GREAT THINGS ABOUT MIDDLE SCHOOLERS!

Everybody is aware of the bad rap that middle-grade students get. Young adolescents inspire all kinds of jokes. Rita Rudner must have had young adolescents in mind when she said, "My husband and I are either going to buy a dog or have a child. We can't decide whether to ruin our carpet or ruin our lives." And I think it was Steven Wright who said "Hire young teens...while they know everything!"

Middle school youngsters earn some of the barbs aimed at them -- because sometimes they act more like second graders than seventh graders! But students in the middle grades are in that strange netherworld between childhood and adolescence. Their bodies are changing. So are their minds, their thought processes. It's a time "when many battles for the self are won and lost," says Mary Pipher (Reviving Ophelia) of students in these in-between years...

MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS: MY HEROES!

Middle school teachers are a rare breed. They're my heroes! To be a middle school teacher -- something this former third-grade teacher could never imagine being -- requires great patience and creativity, great dedication, and, above all, a great sense of humor. So why do middle school teachers love what they do? Why wouldn't they trade places with teachers in the elementary or high school grades? That's what I wanted to know. And that's why I enlisted the help of Education World's "Principal Files" principals and the teachers on the Middle-L listserv... I asked them "What's so great about middle school kids?" Through their responses shines that special dedication -- along with flashes of the required sense of humor! Here, with big-time thanks to the middle school educators who contributed -- are...

FIFTY GREAT THINGS ABOUT MIDDLE SCHOOLERS!

1. They are eager to learn.
2. They are willing to be directed.
3. They are diverse and interesting.
4. They leave after three years!
5. They're just plain fun to be around.
6. They have lots of energy.
7. Most of them love school.
8. They are like clay -- still impressionable.
9. They can be influenced...positively.
10. Ninety-two of them are great singers (says the director of the 93-member middle school chorus).
11. They keep me young.
12. They want to fit in, but they also want to do well in school.
13. They have great personalities.
14. Every day is different.
15. They are potty-trained -- hopefully!
16. They are a study in contrasts.
17. They love new ideas.
18. They have good manners...generally.
19. They will contribute to my social security fund!
20. They respond well to adults.
21. They are enthusiastic -- times two!
22. They are caring (usually *not* just about themselves!).
23. They are fun to teach -- and to learn from.
24. They're electric!
25. They are easy to please.
26. They grow out of it!
27. They're becoming so aware of everything around them.
28. They make me laugh all the time.
29. They are cool!

30. They come up with the most interesting ideas.
31. They like to try new things.
32. They aren't shy about sharing their thoughts.
33. They are so in-your-face honest!
34. They are independent, but they still like their teachers.
35. They love to use my mirror!
36. Hugs are still popular (as long as the other students don't see them giving you one!).
37. They still have hopes and dreams, and they love to share them.
38. They are fashion critics, sure to tell you if you're dressed to meet "the standard"!
39. Everything is funny to them.
40. They're unpredictable.
41. They have great conversation skills.
42. They enjoy my corny stories and jokes.
43. They're unorganized, but manageable.
44. There's no need for aerobics because teachers get plenty of exercise trying to keep up with them!
45. They are helpful.
46. They can be molded in spite of the "supposed" I-hate-all-grown-ups attitude.
47. The light in their eyes still shines.
48. You never know what will come out of their mouths next.
49. There's never a dull moment!
50. And the fiftieth thing teachers think is great about teaching middle schoolers... June! July! And August!

A big THANK YOU to the teachers who contributed to this list -- those at Lester Middle School (Okinawa, Japan); Christian County Middle School (Hopkinsville, KY); Whitney Institute Middle School (Bermuda); Fairgrounds Jr. High School (Nashua, NH); and Washington Middle School (Maryville, MO).

Article by Gary Hopkins, Education World® Editor-in-Chief
Copyright © 1998 Education World

Relationships With Family And Friends

The middle school years are filled with changes for your children. Some of the most important changes have to do with their relationship with you and the family, as well as with friends. Here are some general characteristics of youth at this age.

Family Relationships with Fifth and Sixth Graders

- Your child may display exaggerated emotions. He or she may be very happy, silly, very sad, or very mad and not much in-between.
- They may develop better relationships and increased trust with adults.
- Your child may be more willing to participate in family activities.

Friend Relationships with Fifth and Sixth Graders

- Your child may become more conscious and judgmental of his or her own appearance.
- Your child may begin to conform to peer expectations.
- Your child and his or her friends may have secret codes, meeting places, cliques, etc., with other friends.
- Your child will begin to select friends based on mutual interests, as opposed to the childhood playmate next door.
- As your child begins to try to conform to both societal expectations and peer expectations, he or she may experience conflict between the two.
- Dangers lie in possible experimentation with sex, drugs, and alcohol at this age.

Family Relationships with Seventh and Eighth Graders

- Your child will probably continue to experience emotional highs and lows.
- Your child at this age may spend less time with family and more time with friends.
- Your child still has a strong need for parental attention and respect. He or she needs to have his or her opinion taken seriously during his or her growing independence.
- Your child is likely to develop a strong need for his or her own privacy.

Friend Relationships with Seventh and Eighth Graders

- Sense of humor blossoms.
- Youth become critical of their own appearance.
- Youth become very preoccupied with self-interests.
- "Best Friends" become very important. Activities like going to movies, talking on the telephone, and gossiping tend to increase.

Things To Remember:

- Your awareness, limits, guidance, and approval of your teen are very important now. During children's newly emerging independence, they may act contrary; but they need the safety net of your support and limits to test their wings.
- Younger middle schoolers may be much more open to talking with you. However, older middle schoolers may not want to talk with you.
- If your child has done something wrong (and you are upset), try to say at least two GOOD THINGS to him or her BEFORE you talk about the bad things.
- Use your child's name when talking to him or her.
- Look at your child when you're talking and listening to him or her.
- Keep talking and listening to him or her! Preserve and grow in your relationship!
- Humor is important. Be "funny" and let him or her be "funny."
- If you like what he or she is doing or wearing, tell him or her EXACTLY what you like. This shows you aren't just saying it; it shows you care.

Say Once A Day:

- "I like to be with you."
- "I like your good work."
- "You're doing a good job."
- "Good work!"
- "I'm proud of you."

- “I love you.”
- “You are very important to me.”
- If your child did something well, PRAISE him or her.
- “I” messages let children know exactly what you want, why you want it, and how you want it. They won’t have to guess what you want or how you feel. This is a way of setting limits. Examples: “I feel very upset when you throw your clothes on the floor. Clothes cost money. I work hard for my money and I want you to have nice clothes to wear.” “I do not want you to carry those two full glasses of milk at one time. I am afraid they will spill.”
- Respect your child’s need and right to grow up.
- Support your child’s decision-making process. Help him or her see the pros and cons of various choices and likely outcomes. More and more let the child make decisions (if not life or death decisions). We all have a right to our successes and mistakes and to learning from our mistakes.
- Choose your battles! With teens trying out their independence more and more, it is easy to fight over everything. Ask yourself, “Does this really matter?”
- Save your battles for the big issues.

When Someone Puts You Down

- ❖ You can help your teen feel good by teaching him or her to say something like, “I like myself, and at least I don’t have to stoop to saying mean things to others.” Have your child keep saying this over and over again!
- ❖ When other teens say bad things to him or her, teach your teen to say, “That’s what you think, but at least I don’t try to hurt other people’s feelings.”
- ❖ Have your teen practice saying these things to you so that he or she gets used to them.
- ❖ If the sentences here do not work for your teen, make up others. He or she should be able to say something to help him or her feel better and to the other child who said something bad.

Changes in behavior

- Decline in grades
- Loss of appetite
- Moodiness
- Take an active role in your child’s schooling and activities.
- Work on boosting your child’s self-esteem.
- Talk to school administrators if you suspect a problem.
- Keep a written record of any episodes - what happened, where and when it happened, and who was involved.
- Never tell your child to “hit back.” That not only can lead to more problems, it’s a poor lesson in solving a dispute.

Discipline

To Parents:

A study of successful parents found that when they adhered to the following six basics, their discipline was absolutely fair and highly effective.

- Have a few key rules, not a lot of general ones.
- Clearly state rules and write them down so that if they are broken, there will be no debate as to what you meant.
- Eliminate the phrase “One more time” from your vocabulary. Replace this phrase with “Take responsibility for your actions.”
- Enforce rules consistently and confidently. Follow through with the consequences of a broken rule without fail.
- Discipline silently through your ACTIONS - not warnings, threats, or discussions - and never, never yell.

Here is an additional list of tips successful parents used to ensure reason over rebellion:

- Avoid any excessive or unnecessary discipline. Harsh punishment can result in hostility from the child.
- Provide punishment that “fits the crime” and that can be enforced. Do not tell your child that he or

she is grounded for a month if you both know that neither of you will make it that long.

- Be certain that your punishment has a distinct beginning and end. Let your child know the exact time the “time out” or the “grounding” is to start and stop. (One parent made her child weed the garden as the “time out” punishment.)
- Take measures that teach a lesson. Example: A young person had to go without dinner when she came home long after dinner was over without notifying her parents.
- Stick to your word! As one parent says, “You want to hear your kids say to one another, ‘Better do it, Mom or Dad means it!’”

Peer Pressure!

Feeling Pushed to Do Things, Some Good and Some Bad

- Talk together about friends wanting your teen to do something. Decide if these are good, bad, or in-between things to do.
- Talk together about how your teen may want to do something so he or she can be part of a group. Friends may ask your teen to do something, and your teen does so because he or she wants the friends to like him or her.
- Help your teen think if he or she wants, or doesn't want, to do what friends say.
- Would I do this on my own, or am I doing it to please my friend?
- Is it something that is wrong to do?
- How will I feel if I do it? Will I feel guilty that I did the wrong thing?
- How would you handle it if your friends want you to:
 - skip school?
 - take drugs or drink?
 - destroy someone else's property?
 - “pick on” another person (be a bully)?
- Talk about how your teen can get out of being someplace or doing something that is not right.
 - Together plan a “code.” It can be one word or a few words that mean he or she wants you to come and get him or her. “Just called to say, ‘Hello!’” (“Hello” may be the code word.)
 - The friends should not know about the “code.” This way, your teen can use it when he or she needs to get away from the friends.
- Have your teen say some of the things over and over in front of you so that it will be easy to say it to others, such as “I don't do drugs.” Say family rules, such as, “I can't do that; I have to be home in ten minutes.”
- Ask your teenager to list “rights and wrongs.” If he or she can't, help him or her with the list.
- Try to get your teen to lead or to get his or her friends to do things that are okay. Think before you act!

I Don't Have Time To Eat Now... Healthy Eating Habits

Typical adolescent food habits include increased meal skipping, snacking, consumption of fast foods, and dieting. These habits make adolescents highly susceptible to nutritional deficiencies such as a deficiency of calcium, vitamin A and iron. The middle school youth is beginning the journey into the adolescent years. If parents and youth are aware and can overcome the pitfalls of improper eating habits, snacking and signs of an eating disorder, the youth will form a foundation to build a healthy life style.

Teens and Breakfast

Breakfast is the most important meal of the day and is considered the foundation of healthy eating habits. Studies show that eating breakfast is associated with the following:

- ✓ Strength and endurance in the late morning
- ✓ Improved physical performance
- ✓ Increased alertness and attentiveness
- ✓ Increased concentration
- ✓ Better performance on tests
- ✓ Improved grades

Studies also document the following negative effects from not eating breakfast:

- Headaches
- Stomach cramps
- Irritability
- Poor concentration
- Fatigue

For people on a diet, studies show that skipping a meal does not help them lose weight. In fact, skipping breakfast increases the chance of overeating later in the day. Thus, people should not skip breakfast.

Ideas for Quick and Healthy Breakfasts

- Build a breakfast or lunch around nutritional foods that are ready-to-eat or take little preparation time, such as fresh and canned fruits, yogurt, cheese, hot cereals, sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs.
- People who do not have time to eat should take breakfast food with them. Another time-saving strategy is to make breakfast and/or lunch the previous night.

Ideas for Quick, Healthy Snacks or Meals

- ❑ Vegetarian pizza with low-fat cheese
- ❑ Veggieburger (in the frozen foods section)
- ❑ Baked french fries
- ❑ Hamburger with salad (use low-fat dressing)
- ❑ Sandwich with salad (use fat-free mayonnaise)
- ❑ Potato baked in the microwave (puncture with fork to prevent exploding)
- ❑ Tuna salad and chicken salad (fat-free mayonnaise)
- ❑ Low-fat, low-calorie frozen dinners
- ❑ Spaghetti with vegetable sauce or low-fat meat sauce
- ❑ Low-fat, low-sodium canned soups

Eating Out

Studies of money spent in all United States restaurants show that half is spent at fast-food restaurants. The average American spends approximately \$250 a year on fast foods. Since it is unlikely that teens will not consume fast food, they need to be able to make healthier choices when dining out at these establishments.

Healthy Guidelines for Eating Out

- ❑ Avoid (or at least limit) fried foods.
- ❑ Choose a baked potato instead of french fries. If ordering butter and/or sour cream, obtain it separately and use small portions.
- ❑ Choose a salad instead of french fries with a hamburger.
- ❑ Order salad dressings on the side. Dip the fork in the dressing and then pick up some salad with it.
- ❑ Limit foods with heavy sauces and high-fat cheese. Ask for lighter amounts or for them to be served "on the side."
- ❑ Eat fewer pizzas with lots of meat. Instead choose plain cheese, or select vegetables as toppings.
- ❑ Choose frozen yogurt instead of ice cream.
- ❑ Share a dessert with a friend instead of eating a whole one.
- ❑ Order water with lime or lemon wedges instead of high-sugar drinks.
- ❑ Save food to eat at another time by asking to have leftovers wrapped.
- ❑ Choose low-fat vegetarian (meatless) entrees more often.
- ❑ Choose low-fat pasta dishes.
- ❑ Have fresh fruit for dessert.

Depression In Adolescents

Middle school students will go through many changes during their teen years.

- Fast-paced physical growth
- Making new friends
- Meeting people with different values
- Becoming more independent
- Adjusting to a new school building
- Adjusting to multiple classes
- Peer pressure
- Higher academic demands

These changes will likely cause middle school students to feel unsure of themselves. However, most young people adapt to these changes over time. But what if your middle school student doesn't seem to be adapting very well at all? There are signs that may tell you if your middle school student is having trouble. These can be signs of depression, and they should be heeded. Determining whether or not your child is depressed depends on several factors.

- Frequency—How frequent are these behaviors? Everyone has a bad day once in awhile, but if your student seems to have a string of bad days, you might want to pay closer attention.
- Severity—How bad are the “bad days”? Moodiness is a common characteristic of teens, but intense rages, crying binges, or fearfulness may be a sign that something else is going on.
- Endurance—If these signs don't seem to go away, you might want to seek help for your child.
- Previous changes—If your young person has undergone a big life change (e.g., parents' divorce, moving, death of someone close) or even a smaller change (e.g. going to a new school, peer problems), he or she is more vulnerable to developing depression.

Here are some things to look for to determine if your teen may be suffering from depression:

- Sad or “down” mood
- Increased irritability
- Intense worry
- A lack of interest or enjoyment in normal activities
- Low energy
- Withdrawal from interactions with others
- Increase in anger or verbal hostilities
- Defiance of authority
- Restlessness
- Frequent complaints of being bored
- Drop in school performance
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Poor self-esteem
- Intense self-criticism

What should you do if you think your middle school student is depressed?

- Be available to your young person as much as possible. Finding ways to be with him or her will send a message that you are available to talk when he or she is ready.
- Talk to the teacher or administrator at your child's middle school, a youth minister at your church, or your pastor. Get help! Do not ignore depression.

Eight Habits of Successful Middle School Students

1. Be Responsible and Know Yourself
 - When the word “responsibility” is broken down, the key words are “respond” and “ability.” A successful person has the ability to respond to challenges.
 - Choose your own response to a difficult situation beforehand, rather than wait for it to happen and not be prepared.
 - Begin by looking honestly at your personal strengths and weaknesses, and determine your own sense of responsibility for your behavior, and for your family and friends.
2. Reflect Success
 - Have a clear picture of the kind of person you would like to become and the types of goals that you want to achieve.

- Identify a positive adult role model, who has achieved the same goals and reflects the same success that you desire. You can imitate similar pathways to success.
 - Not every role model has to be a famous basketball player or movie actor. Some of the best role models are in your own neighborhood, schools, churches, and even your own home.
3. Aim Toward Your Goal
- Put life, family, friends, and values in a good perspective.
 - To design a successful career, start by first identifying the end goal, and then determine the steps necessary to obtain it.
 - Find a caring adult who will be able to help you put your plan into place one step at a time.
4. Prioritize and Maximize
- Now that you have a successful vision of yourself, you can begin prioritizing your daily routine so that you are able to make the best use of your time and your energy.
 - Don't get caught up in things that may take you away from your goal, such as alcohol, drugs, or negative people.
 - Anything that does not benefit your vision of success does not benefit you.
 - Organize your work area and keep it free from distractions.
 - Improve your organizational skills by using a daily planner, a personal "To Do" list, and a regular personal evaluation meeting with an adult or a mentor to check your progress.
5. Be a Winner
- Build relationships in which you and the other person both succeed. These are called "win-win" partnerships. These "win-win" partners should be friends whom you can call on for support, tutoring, or for conversation that helps you stay on track.
 - Teachers, coaches, principals, and mentors could be partners who help you succeed.
6. Communicate
- Communication is the essential key to understanding.
 - Don't be afraid to ask questions, and when answers are given be sure to listen.
 - The cycle of communication is usually broken when you try to second-guess what others are trying to say.
 - Try to understand the motivations and goals of others around you. This can improve your communications and increase your network of positive partnerships.
7. Connect to a Good Power Source
- Having access to strong, positive partners will increase your ability to succeed.
8. Stop, Look, and Listen
- Your world will continue to change and evolve, so be prepared to review, reevaluate, and renew your goals.
 - Look at these changes not as disappointments, but as opportunities to improve a realistic plan for your long-term success.

Show Your Student That You Like To Know About His Or Her Homework.

- ✓ Praise your teen for putting the homework in the spot you both pick out. It should be placed in the same spot every day. "I'm glad you put the homework on the hall table." Tell other things you are glad your teen did.
- ✓ You may ask, "What homework do you have tonight?"
- ✓ Plan a special time to do homework. The TV should not be on at this time.
- ✓ Have a place at the table where written homework can be done.
- ✓ Go over the work with your teen when it is done.
- ✓ Ask your teen if he or she needs help with some work or subject. You may say something like, "I am pleased with your history quiz. Tell me about your spelling grades."
- ✓ If needed, try to get your teen to ask the teacher for help with the subject.

Supporting Your Child In School

Our school is committed to helping all children learn at high levels. As a parent or guardian, there are ways that you can seriously help your child in his or her job of school learning. Here are some of them:

- Meet your child's teachers and principal as soon as possible each school year. These are important members of your child's "school family."
- Learn the best time and manner to reach them, for future use. Every middle school teacher has a planning period during the school day that can be used for parent conferences.
- Be involved in your child's school. Volunteer to help. Join the Moms in Touch prayer group; consider getting involved in helping with Spiritual Emphasis Days that occur twice each year.
- When problems arise:
 - Ask your child for his or her understanding of what's wrong. Then contact the school person involved, usually the teacher. If it cannot be resolved by telephone, ask to meet with the teacher or your child's team of teachers. If you need further help, talk with the principal.
- If your child is having trouble learning or has behavior or emotional problems in school, discuss testing your child in order to detect specific needs that require specific methods of instruction. School failure can lead to misery and many other problems that could be avoided by early intervention. Your child needs your help and belief in him or her, especially when there are problems. Do whatever it takes to get on a better course. Options exist to help all children succeed. Often, they are easy to find, but not always. PERSIST. Your child deserves support, and you are most likely the best one to give it.