



the family connection

News to use for families of young adolescents

Volume 17 Number 1

Build Strong Supports To Help Your Child Survive Middle Grades Struggles

Lori Day

While I could have written an article about the middle school years based on my career as a school administrator, educational psychologist, and teacher, as well as my observations as a parent, I wanted to get out of my own head a bit, so I interviewed 15 parents of current middle schoolers around the country. Many of the parents expressed much angst, for which I recommend creating the support systems described below. Let's consider a couple of typical parent concerns:

One mother described the many difficult social challenges faced by her three children—two boys and one girl—and her own struggles as a single parent to help her kids manage anxiety, deal with depression, and navigate bullying during a very unstable period of their lives, which coincided with the chaos of emerging from divorce.

How do I help my kids focus on academics when they have to survive the social scene? What to wear, how to act, who to befriend, how to avoid bullies, how to get invited to the right parties ... it's overwhelming ... for the whole family.

Another mother described, at length, her daughter's pubescent awkwardness and unhappy journey through the rough waters of mean-girl cliques and making healthier social choices. This parent concluded her anecdote with:

Teachers in middle school each see kids for so little time per day, they can't help but be disconnected from what is really going on. No single adult has a handle on the social dynamics in the way elementary school homeroom teachers do. In middle school, homeroom is for taking attendance. The kids are totally on their own. And you know what it comes down to?
Lunch is the most powerful part of the day.

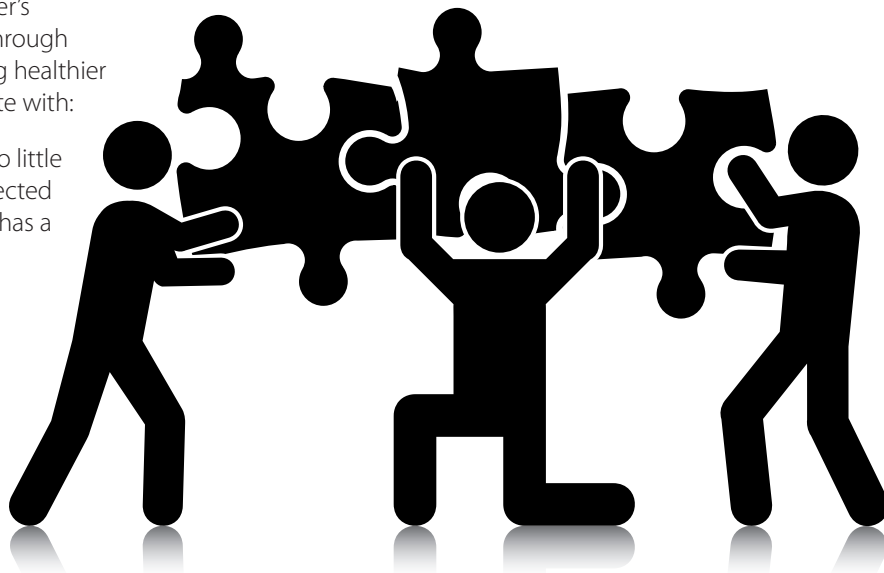
Indeed. In the daily lives of middle schoolers, it is where empires rise and fall.

Support System #1:

Your child's teachers and school

You can form a collaborative support system with your child's teachers and school. The home-school partnership is much more than a buzz term. It is the mechanism for ensuring that the necessary communication, agreements, roles, and responsibilities of each party are set out clearly and lived out daily.

- Read the parent handbook to understand how the school views this partnership. Ask questions, make suggestions, and play an active role in defining how this relationship can best support your child.
- While things are going smoothly, in anticipation of rougher waters, think through the best protocol for expressing concerns to your child's teachers or administrators. Who should you contact first? Who should you contact if the first person cannot resolve your concerns? What method of contact is best—e-mail, phone, or in person?



- Find out how the school operates when it comes to parent communication. Some schools use e-mail widely, while others prefer that e-mail be used for minor issues only, favoring phone calls or face-to-face meetings. Some require teachers to return e-mails within 24 hours. Keep in mind that teachers often need more time to read and respond to e-mails than parents do because they are in front of children all day. Also, some teachers like using e-mail while others really do not. Parents will get the best result if they follow the school's lead on when and how to use e-mail and remain cognizant of the perils of e-mail "tone."
- Avoid going "straight to the top" unless the issue involving your child merits that level of urgency. If the issue can be brought first to a teacher, try that. If the teacher does not or cannot help you, then go to the vice-principal/department chair, etc. Go to the principal only *after* you have followed the proper "chain of command" so that you do not alienate the staff. In cases of emergency, or when other options have been exhausted, do go to the principal, voice your concerns, and expect to be heard.
- Much is being written about the erosion of respect—not just of kids for parents, but of parents for school personnel. There is no better way of sabotaging yourself and your child than treating teachers and administrators in an aggressive, condescending, or demeaning way. Adults working on behalf of kids, and seen in advocacy roles by kids, need to maintain civility.
- Find out how you can support the school, as time permits. Join the PTA, serve on committees the principal sets up, help with fund-raising, be a room parent, or volunteer in the classroom. It's a fact that parents who give time and resources to the school are better able to navigate the system when they need to enlist extra support for their child.
- Be honest with the educators working with your child. Hiding relevant information is never a good idea.
 - If you are experiencing a stressful time within your family (divorce, death of a grandparent, job loss, etc.), let the

school staff know so that they can better support your child. Otherwise, they will sense that something is "off," but they won't know what they can do to be helpful.

- If your child has a learning disability, social challenges, psychological or emotional issues, or is taking any medications, let the staff know up front and work together to create a support plan. By not being forthright with the school, you could compromise your own integrity in the eyes of the staff. They *always* discover for themselves that your child has needs, and they are then at a disadvantage in supporting or remediating because they have not had the opportunity to be proactive.

Support System #2: Other parents

I am often asked how middle grades parents can make connections with other parents, since the environment is less facilitative of these bonds than was the elementary school environment. These connections take more effort than when children are younger, but start by getting to know the parents of their friends. This gives you a needed window into the family values of the parents of your kids' friends and allows you to have some level of connection, should a time ever come that you need to have an important conversation with one of these parents. Here are a few ideas:

- Seek parent connections through school-related committees, volunteer opportunities, or events.
- Use scouts, sports teams, religious organizations, or any of a variety of other community venues for kids to connect with other parents. This is part of being a "village."
- Sometimes parent education events at school are a surprisingly great way to meet like-minded parents. While teachers (and parents) often lament that the parents who most need to attend certain parent education evenings are the ones who never do, and the ones showing up are already in the "choir," those parents are perhaps the ones you most want on your team.

By proactively cultivating support systems, you can ensure they will be there when you need them!

Lori Day is an educational psychologist, consultant, and writer with Lori Day Consulting in Newburyport, MA. Lori has worked in the field of education for more than 25 years in public schools, private schools, and at the collegiate level. She writes and blogs about parenting, education, children, gender, media, and pop culture.



The Family Connection is published by Association for Middle Level Education as part of its ongoing commitment encouraging family and community involvement in the education of young adolescents. AMLE is unique among educational organizations because of its commitment to addressing the needs of middle level students—youth ages 10 to 15. Membership in AMLE is open to all persons interested in and concerned about middle level education. Teachers, administrators, parents, teacher educators, college students, and other educational professionals are well represented in AMLE's membership. Call 1-800-528-6672 to receive further information about membership and middle level resources.