



the family connection

News to use for families of young adolescents

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Are the Experiences of Middle School Boys and Girls the Same?

Lori Day

This is the final in my four-part series on raising middle schoolers. As part of the project, I interviewed about a dozen mothers and fathers of middle school kids. I was surprised by how quickly the ones raising children of both genders were to point out that it was much easier raising a boy of this age than a girl. Some of the thematic points they made included:

- Girls are more “hypersocial” than boys.
- Girl bullying is sneakier, meaner, and harder to deal with.
- Girls worry much more about cliques and popularity.
- Girls are in a much bigger rush to grow up, while boys are in many ways still “little boys.” There is more pressure on girls to be “out there” in a provocative way.
- Boys are less “worldly” and their lives are “simpler.”
- Girls are consumed with concerns about body image, clothes, and attracting the opposite sex.
- Girls are more susceptible to media and marketing aimed at exploiting their vulnerabilities about their looks, while boys are able to focus more of their time on sports, etc. Girls play sports too, but their emotional energy gets very drained by a constant concern about their appearance and attracting boys.



However, a small sample size could have skewed the results. No one talked about how boys are more likely to have learning disabilities, more likely to have ADHD and be medicated, more likely to struggle academically, less likely to be club leaders in school, more likely to drop out of school, less likely to go to college, and so on. And yet, over the course of my career and my own parenting, I do agree that raising girls *at this particular age* might be more difficult than raising boys. This may be due to biology, neurology, or society... or any combination of these and/or other factors... but there is something uniquely challenging about the way girls reach puberty earlier than boys, often right as they enter middle school, and then become vulnerable to a modern-day culture that does not protect their girlhoods.

What Are Parents Saying?

The mother of a sixth grade girl explained:

Shopping is impossible. I absolutely cringe at the clothes being marketed to girls. You can't find anything that is not too tight, too short, or too suggestive. It's like you are "funneled in" and have no options.

Another mother who chose single-sex schools for her two boys and two girls feels there are less of these gender-related pressures at this critical age if the children are educated separately. She expressed a relative lack of concern about social media, but more concern about how girls can grow up to be self-assured and independent in light of the excessive emphasis placed on physical appearance.

Lots of parents worry about social media, but I'm hands-off. It will work out. In our family, there haven't been any really bad experiences. I think kids need to figure this stuff out for themselves—with parent guidance. I am more concerned about the stress level of girls, academically and socially. And I want to know how parents can help girls be self-confident

and independent, and experience life in healthy risk-taking ways. Sexualization seems to be much more on the minds of the mothers of girls that I know than the mothers of boys.

A father of a daughter made this plaintive point:

I want my daughter appreciated for who she is, not how she looks. I don't want her treated like an object, or to ever objectify herself as I see so many girls this age doing. I never want her to "dumb it down" to attract boys. I worry about the messages our culture sends to girls. Why don't I hear more fathers talking about this?

And the mother of a boy made this one:

It's not just about the dangers for girls. I see my son needing guidance, too. He gravitates toward violent video games. Of course, no mother thinks her son would ever watch porn on the Internet, but I know that some of them do. And then that is not good for how they view girls or their own future relationships with women. Kids are growing up in a different world. All of them are being exposed to things that we never saw as kids because things were regulated. Kids don't know how to process the adult material they encounter. This applies to boys as well as girls. And teachers are often looked to as the solution, when in reality they cannot solve these problems. It begins with parents...but society is certainly not helping us. I am very hands-on with my son. I know that if I am disengaged, he is at risk of making choices that are not healthy. I just do the best I can, but I always worry it is not enough, and I worry about what I— don't know.

Recommendations:

- Be aware that you are role models—the children are always watching (and listening!) Limit your child's exposure to things like "diet talk," gender stereotyping, premature discussions about getting into a good college, and excessive involvement from the sidelines during youth sports (you know what I'm talking about).
- Make considered decisions about the amount of pop culture you let into your home, and communicate those decisions early and clearly with children. My daughter laughs whenever she reminds me that I used to say to her, "Your parents are raising you, not Hollywood!"

- That said, it is also important not to shield and protect children to such a degree that they never learn how to cope with our pop culture, media, and marketing aimed at youth. It's all about balance. Children who are bubble-wrapped often arrive at college unprepared for navigating the world they do have to live in.
- Whatever you decide in terms of how much pop culture is enough, teach media literacy to children early and often.
- Make sure that you balance your focus on your child's academic achievement with plenty of focus on other competencies like social skills, artistic expression, physical fitness and health.
- Try to avoid competing about your child's accomplishments with other parents, especially in front of your child. It's not only distasteful, it harms children by sending the message that achievement is more important than effort and that your love for him/her is somehow related to how much he or she excels. All of this can actually backfire.
- Don't forget to allow for critical (and often missing) unstructured down time and time spent in nature!
- Find ways to volunteer at your child's school. It may not be as easy as it was in elementary school, but anything you can do to be present there will send your child and his/her teachers the message that you are invested, contributing, and wanting to be supportive and involved. Help chaperone field trips, ask to help be a parent volunteer coordinator, help backstage in theater productions, help with community service, help with fundraising, or ask teachers if there are any special projects they could give you. These are just a few ideas for building and maintaining a connection to your child's school community.

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.