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A conversation with Judith Warner,
author of
AND THEN THEY STOPPED TALKING TO ME:
Making Sense of Middle School

Due to the pandemic, many parents are dealing with the unprecedented situation of having middle school students at home all day. Do you have any advice for parents on how to navigate this time as smoothly as possible?

This is an incredibly stressful time for families. Even for those fortunate enough not to be dealing with illness or unemployment, homelessness or hunger, the pressures and anxiety are crippling. The demands on parents are, to my mind, downright cruel—the expectation that they can homeschool kids while trying to home-earn a living is simply crazy. And however bad it is for parents overall, there's a strong argument to be made that for parents of middle schoolers, the situation is the worst.

Because early adolescence is such a sensitive period, all the stresses and anxieties of this awful and weird time are hitting middle schoolers extra hard. Everything is out of whack; they live for their friends, and they can't see them. They're wired to want more independence from their parents, and they're stuck at home with them, 24/7. And just when everyone is flooded with anxiety, rattling with uncertainty and struggling to function and focus, they're being saddled with the worst aspects of school (worksheets!) but without the social contact, with both teachers *and* peers, that can make learning so rewarding.

Parents have to give themselves and their middle schoolers a break. They have to recognize that they're being put in a position to do the impossible: to be teacher, counselor, coach, tutor and afterschool program director all rolled into one, with no training and, of course, no preparation.

We can't let the social pathologies of the moment infect our family relationships. Parents of middle schoolers in particular have to give themselves—and their kids—a break. They can't allow themselves to go crazy trying to control the uncontrollable. And if that means assignments don't get done, that grades aren't great, so be it. Math can always be retaught. Undoing the effects of toxic levels of stress is much, much harder. Prioritize your relationship with your kids above all else.

What inspired the book's title?

Coming up with a title that captured the full sweep of the book—which looks at middle school not just as an educational institution but as a phase of life, a set of memories and, above all, a *feeling*—was no simple thing. Ultimately, it was a matter of closing my eyes and letting what I've come to think of as the "middle school feeling" wash over me. And then, there it was: that terrifying, out-of-the-blue day when, suddenly, *they* stopped talking to me. (The "popular" girls. In eighth grade.) That's the way the words came to me. What was interesting, however, was that other people, hearing the title for the first time, just as quickly interpreted it very differently: they imagined the "me" as a middle school parent, dealing with kids who'd suddenly withdrawn into the stony silence of closed bedroom doors and headphones. What was great, I realized, was that the title could work on both levels—capturing the middle school experience from both a kid's and an adult's perspective.

When it comes to being in middle school, or parenting children of that age, how has the landscape changed since your *New York Times* bestseller PERFECT MADNESS was published in 2005?

The advent of the iPhone is the most important change of all. The use of communication technology to further the cause of in-group/out-group social sorting and plain-old meanness is hardly new; iPhones didn't create middle school cruelty or angst. I think that everyone who went through what was still most commonly called "junior high" in the 1970s and '80s remembers the nefarious practice of a "friend" calling another friend and getting her to say terrible things about a third friend, who was listening in from another extension. FOMO isn't new either—you can find junior high girls suffering over the fear of missing out in books and women's magazines going back at least to the 1940s. (One even wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt about it.) With the spread of smartphones and the proliferation of social media, the difference in the past fifteen or so years is that there's no escape, ever: middle school buzzes in your pocket, follows you home, lives in your bedroom, and never, ever gives you a break.

You say that our memories of our middle school years can be indelible. How can our residual emotions from middle school exert a powerful force over us even as adults?

There are a fascinating series of changes that happen to the brain in the years around puberty. As an ensemble, they essentially give the brain a tune-up in terms of efficiency and acuity. Impressions become sharper, feelings cut deeper, the memories we form are more intense and detailed. That's why we remember our suffering so well, and why what happened to us often continues to loom so large in our minds for so long after. That's why we come back to our middle school stories over and over again, even in pop culture: think of the power of the recent movie "Eighth Grade," and the irresistible pull of otherwise cringe-worthy shows like "Big Mouth." In earlier centuries, puberty came later, but the mental changes around it were the same, and you can find descriptions of them—sometimes laudatory, sometimes fearful, sometimes floridly hilarious—in writing going back to classical antiquity. We have an endless fascination with that phase of life. It's in many ways the moment when we start to become our adult selves. But we shouldn't give it too much power. It's easy to overestimate the accuracy of our memories and underestimate the degree to which they were formed at a time when we were better at experiencing our feelings than making sense of them.

How has recent research and an expanded diagnostic vocabulary for adolescent psychology changed our views of middle schoolers?

We now know—based on technological advances in brain imaging—much of what the most forward-thinking social scientists believed more than a century ago: something new and special happens in the minds of kids right around puberty. We know that early adolescence is a phase of life when kids are capable of taking a great leap forward intellectually: they are eager to learn and hungry for knowledge, curious, filled with a strong sense of injustice, passionate in their interests, and possessed of a wide range of new cognitive abilities. But this expert knowledge, which lay behind the birth of the junior high school right around 1900, was largely ignored throughout much of the 20th century, as junior high schoolers came into being as a new, and largely disliked, breed of human. Today's middle schoolers have inherited that legacy. It has become all but impossible to separate who they really are and what they are capable of doing from the negative stereotypes that adults have about them. In recent decades, academic researchers have done a great deal of work to try to set the record straight, but it remains extremely difficult to break through the popular view of 11 to 14-year-olds as little monsters enslaved to their "raging hormones."

Why do you believe that upper middle class kids are really struggling in our current culture?

This might come as a surprise to readers. After all, wealthier parents have money and, generally, a high level of education, so their kids have access from the start to all the things that set them up for a lifetime of thriving: good schools, quality food and medical care, cultural enrichment, (relatively) stable households, safe neighborhoods, and the expectation that their voices matter and will be respected. At the same time, however, they're also growing up in communities in which the adults are experiencing class anxiety like never before. That anxiety translates into a widespread feeling that there are no longer any guarantees when it comes to social status, which in turn has led to a narrowing of what's considered the path to success. That has brought about a huge mental health crisis on college campuses as kids flame out after too many years of burning the candle at both ends. The pressures fueling that crisis are now starting in the middle school years, which is when the college craziness in upper middle class communities begins. There's a significant body of research demonstrating that the values that most markedly hold sway in upper middle class communities—being competitive, being a winner, looking out for #1 to guarantee personal success at all costs—are psychologically damaging. And they're especially so to kids in early adolescence.

How did you decide who to interview for the book? Was it difficult to achieve diversity?

I started by using what sociologists call "snowball sampling," which is a fancy way of saying that I sent out a general query to dozens of people I knew, or whose work I knew, to see if they wanted to talk about their middle school experiences. I prioritized those who had talked to me or written on the topic, who currently or recently had middle schoolers, or who were experts in that age group. I then asked them to pass my query on to other people who they thought might want to talk. I got a *huge* response rate—so great that if I'd spoken to everyone I'd still be doing those interviews four years later.

Getting people to talk about their experiences *as parents,* however, was a whole other story. Even when they're speaking anonymously, people are extremely protective when it comes to sharing stories about their kids, and they tend to want very badly to be seen in a positive light. I'd witnessed a lot of bad parent behavior up close when my daughter was in middle school, and entertained some very ugly feelings myself—some very middle schoolerish feelings—toward other parents. But, at first, none of my interview subjects admitted to having noticed or experienced any of that, which made me wonder if I was uniquely awful. Fortunately, I went on to interview a number of psychologists and other experts who spend a lot of time talking to and, above all, observing middle school parents, and they said they weren't surprised at the denials that I was getting. They explained that the phenomenon of parents behaviorally "going back to middle school" along with their middle schoolers is ubiquitous—as is parent denial of it. So I changed the way I asked my questions. It was the same lesson I'd had to learn while reporting *Perfect Madness:* ask a group of women to tell you about all the ways they're crazy, perfectionist control-freaks and you get nothing. But ask them what it's like to be a mother around the other mothers in their communities, and you get it all. The same thing happened here.

My interview subjects represented a good mix of people of different racial and ethnic groups; they ranged in age from their 20s to their 60s; some were gay or lesbian (though none were trans or gender non-conforming), and they had grown up in all different parts of the country, with some growing up overseas. Their families of origin spanned the economic spectrum, though the majority had grown up at least middle class. Where they weren't diverse, however, was in their level of education: With only one or two exceptions, all were four-year college-educated, and many held graduate degrees. This meant that, no matter where they'd started, they were now—again, with one or two exceptions—at the top of the middle class or in the upper middle class. Limiting though this is—and it is, admittedly, a limitation—it's also symptomatic of the fact that the kinds of parents who'd first caught my eye, parents with the time and temperamental inclination to closely follow and get caught up in their middle schoolers' social miseries—are grossly overrepresented in affluent communities.

Why do you believe your book will resonate even with people who don't have children?

Everyone was once a middle schooler, so everyone knows what it's like to be hit with the middle school feeling: that overwhelming discomfort of not being rich enough or cool enough or attractive enough or sophisticated enough or plugged-in enough—whatever your thing, or the thing that's valued in a particular circle, happens to be. People reference it all the time, saying, "It's like middle school all over again" when describing the behavior of "mean girls" in an office or the "queen bee" in a book club. (Men tend to get a free pass with this vocabulary, which isn't accurate or fair.) They tend to make middle school a kind of laugh line: "Oh my God, I felt like I was back in middle school!" But if you dig deeper you find an avalanche of emotion underneath, and, much of the time, all sorts of unanswered questions: *Why did that happen to me? Why did I dump my best friend? Why did everyone say I was "annoying?"* I think a lot of people are still looking for answers, decades later. They really want to be able to make sense of their middle school experiences. After all, more likely than not, no one helped them do so at the time.

I was able to go talk to experts, look things up, boil it all down, and extract the most important and interesting takeaways. *And* I share story after story to let people know that they weren't—and aren't—alone.

Has your view of your own middle school experience changed as a result of your work on this book?

My view changed enormously, not just of my middle school experience, but of myself. For a very long time I saw myself purely as having been a mean girl's victim. Now I know that, while I had at times been victimized, I had sometimes been pretty mean, too. I may have been more guilty of sins of

omission (what we'd today call "ghosting") than of commission (out-and-out bullying), but the dividing line between the two is less solid than it might seem. I understand now that when it came not just to telling but to perceiving my own middle school story, I was a very unreliable narrator. I missed a lot when I was in sixth through eighth grade—pretty much all the really big stuff going on beyond the scope of my own self-obsession. I say this now not just to be self-critical—another form of self-obsession—but because realizing that my story was more complex, that I was not purely acted upon, that I could, with some adult help, have perhaps handled things differently, is actually very empowering.

AND THEN THEY STOPPED TALKING TO ME delves into how an adult's perspective of middle school can influence a child's experience of it. Why is it so important to understand our own role in the middle school experience?

Even though they are coming into their own, socially and intellectually, and beginning to explore and discover the universe outside of their homes (or should be), middle schoolers still primarily know the world as we present it to them. No matter how much they seemingly reject us, we remain their base of operation. Their rebellions tend to be pretty superficial; the not-me stuff they try on still has us as its center of gravity. What we say, how we act, dress, think, talk about and relate to others is enormously important—perhaps even more important than at any other point in their childhood, because their powers of perception have become so sharp. Just as, when they were very little, our reaction when they fell down conveyed to them whether or not they were hurt, in middle school our degree of calm or agitation cues their responses to their social and emotional ups and downs.

What are some of the craziest parenting behaviors you document in your book?

Fathers getting into a fist fight because their daughters are at war. Mothers making birthday party invitations into affairs of state. Parents pressuring schools (sometimes successfully!) to fire teachers or administrators who try to get in the way of popular kids' social machinations. The list goes on and on.

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