



parents league
of new york

the review 2021

Essential Articles on
Parenting & Education

The Challenges of the Middle School Parent

Judith Warner Journalist and Author

It's a very rare thing, to be able to pinpoint the exact moment when a book idea came to you. Entirely by accident, I discovered the exact day and time when the idea for my latest book, *And Then They Stopped Talking to Me: Making Sense of Middle School*, first came to life. I was trying to recall some details of an anecdote that I planned to include in my introduction, when I came upon an email exchange I'd had with the school counselor, back when my daughter was in seventh grade. (I have two daughters, but in the book, to preserve their privacy, I combined them into one, and will do the same here.)

I had sent the counselor, whom I'll call Nancy, some lines from Anne Lamott's 2005 book, *Operating Instructions*. They were lines that I had and would continue to send out to other parents in the class many times over the course of what Nancy liked to call our kids' "middle school careers." They read: "The seventh and eighth grades were for me, and for every single good and interesting person I've ever known, what the writers of the Bible meant when they used the words *hell* and *the pit*." Anne Lamott had been referring to the experience of being a seventh and eighth grader. But I was finding they were equally true of the experience of seventh grade parenthood.

Nancy the counselor had been trying, without success, to bring my daughter and another girl together for a "friendship meeting." The two girls had been having problems for a while, and now their issues had drawn in a third girl, who felt like she was stuck in the middle. I was doing my best to step back, as all the books and Back to School Night presentations always said we parents should, and the other girls' mothers, I'd been led to believe, were doing the same. In fact, early on, I re-discovered in the emails, Nancy had written two of us to "commend" us for it.

But, suddenly, all sorts of odd things began to happen. There were secrets and behind-the-scenes phone calls, furtive, avoidant glances, whispered, mysterious plans, a bizarre, hard-to-pinpoint change in the atmosphere that was jarring after many years mostly of friendship in our very small school community. Stories were inconsistent. Motivations obscure. “You can’t believe anything she says,” one had said of another, mid-drama. “She lies all the time.”

It was peak middle school behavior, in short. Except that the “one,” and the “she” and the “you” (me) were middle-aged women: the *moms*. Who were keeping the girl-drama going, digging all of us in deeper, while our daughters seemed inclined to let go and move on.

Living Our Child’s Ups and Downs

I was dumbfounded by all of this. Where were the women I’d known since our daughters were in kindergarten? They seemed to have been body-snatched and replaced, internally, by seventh graders. I wished I could time-travel back to the past and see the forces that had shaped this bizarre present. If I could, I thought, I might be able to discover how our remembrances of the hell of middle school were coming back to life, triggering so much *oddness* in the adults around me.

It wasn’t just the regression I witnessed in the behavior of the other moms that concerned me. My emotions too were out of whack—I was reacting to my daughter’s social ups and downs with the outsized joys and pains of a mercurial 12-year-old. A lot of other adults in our world—even some teachers—seemed to become oddly boundary-less around our middle schoolers, too. Some made judgmental comments about kids’ bodies and dress. Others seemed overcome with an odd sort of learned helplessness as they anticipated the advent of an age of “mean girls” and bullying boys. Some, shrugging, took refuge in throwing around the conversation-ending phrase, “raging hormones!” Many seemed to view their children’s classmates as vehicles of “precocious” contagion. All, one way or the other, seemed to view the middle school experience as something overwhelming

and overpowering. Middle schoolers—*other* people’s middle schoolers—loomed large in their minds as potential monsters. I wondered how it was possible that a generation of parents who had long distinguished themselves through their efforts to control and shape just about everything in their kids’ lives were suddenly so prone to throw up their hands and admit defeat.

“Any time you want to talk, I’m here for you,” was Nancy’s emailed reply. Which pretty much summed up the disconnect between the insight I was seeking and the information that was on offer during my middle school parenting years.

Past and Present Converge

I now know, after four years of research and writing, and close to 125 interviews, that I was hardly alone in feeling so completely at sea.

Decades of research show that the middle school years are the number one most challenging time in the life of parents. They have been ever since kids in the years around puberty started to live full time at home, which they did not consistently do prior to the mid- to late-19th century. They’re tough for all sorts of well-known reasons: adored and adoring former 10-year-olds suddenly become critical and harsh. They withdraw from their families and become obsessed with their friends. They turn moody and—increasingly, these days—stressed. Their problems, especially their social dramas, take on a level of complexity that their parents can no longer fix with the simplicity of kissing a boo-boo away.

Mothers have complained about all of this to women’s magazine writers and child psychologists since the early 20th century. But it’s a peculiarity of the early 21st that, all too often, mothers and fathers alike are getting drawn into the quagmire of early adolescence along with their kids. Riding the ups and downs of the roller-coaster of popularity right alongside them. Agonizing when they’re excluded, plotting with them how to get in and/or exclude others—all in the service of what we’ve all been told, over and over again, is good parenting: advocating for your child.

Empathizing with your child. Being present for your child, so that they're really known and heard and seen and get what they "need."

As adults told me with great and lasting anguish about their own middle school years, I came to realize that so many parents live in terror that their children will suffer as they did—or will inflict suffering on others as they did at the same age. Their memories of that time are so fresh and so powerful. The incidents they recount could have happened yesterday. All of which means that, when it comes to today's middle schoolers—their own middle schoolers—past and present often converge. The full weight of emotion—fear and dread mixed with enormous love—comes up against an old sense of powerlessness. The forces middle school can unleash—the cruelties of cliques; the pain of rejection; the self-consciousness and sometime self-hate—seem so huge, and parents feel so small. Above all, they find themselves lacking the tools to make sense of it all, much less help their kids to do the same.

Age-old Parental Anxiety, Updated

When my daughter was in middle school, I certainly felt that way. But if I'd had access then to the knowledge I've gained since, things would have been very different.

The forces at play in middle school are really the building blocks of selfhood: ways of being and relating that are tried out and shed with the rapidity of short-lived seventh grade friendships. Social skills are being learned day by day, and—just like with writing or math—they come much more easily to some kids than others. Maturation happens—physical, cognitive and emotional growth all mixed together—but it doesn't all happen at the same time for all kids, or even in a coherently coordinated way within the same kid. The range of "normal" is enormous—far wider than middle schoolers or even most adults imagine. And yet, amidst all that change and all that difference, the demand for conformity is the most extreme.

There's huge anxiety, for kids and parents alike: Am I okay? Are they okay? That great worry about okay-ness—the

cosmic okay-ness of social acceptability—has its roots in our evolutionary biology. It dates back to a very long-ago time when puberty marked the moment when young humans (like other primates) separated from their close kinship group of origin and ventured out into the wider pool where their social rank determined with whom they could mate. It turned much later into parental anxiety about boys' future professional prospects (determined, as of the late 19th century in America, by whether or not they stayed in school) and girls' chances at marriage.

These days, the gap between the start of puberty and the beginning of something like adult life has vastly widened, but, on some residual level of hard-wired parental emotion, our ambitions still kick in. In some communities, particularly hard-driving upper middle class communities, it takes the form of a competitive frenzy over what sports to play, what math to take, what high school to get into—all as a prelude to winning entry to a top college. And all of that competition, that preoccupation with present and future status in all its forms, feeds insecurity, driving deep and lasting middle-schoolerish behavior in both parents and kids.

As the Arizona State University psychologist Suniya Luthar, my go-to expert in all things motherhood, adolescence and class-related, put it to me, “There’s only room in the mirror for one, and we are all trying to get that one spot in the upper middle class. My gain is your loss; your gain is my loss.”

Finding Peace

Speaking to experts like Luthar, hearing the personal stories of parents and former middle schoolers of all ages, reading about the evolution of scientific and popular belief about early adolescence, gave me an enormous amount of enjoyment over the past four years. It also brought me a great deal of peace. Making sense of middle school means coming to terms with how we become who we are. The answers I’ve found have made our world make sense to me, both as a mother and as an adult generally, in ways that it never quite did before. I’ve been able to write the book that I

longed to read back in the days when I was struggling with the challenges of middle school parenthood. It's my dearest hope now that others may find it before their own middle school feelings subsume them—and will feel less alone.

Judith Warner is a journalist and the author of several books, including *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* and her most recent *And Then They Stopped Talking to Me: Making Sense of Middle School*. She is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress.