

# MOVING FORWARD

News and information about the education of special  
needs students for teachers and parents

Spring 2019

## MIDDLE SCHOOL: *THE PERFECT STORM*

Middle school is often described as “the perfect storm” due to the epic clash of physical, emotional, behavioral, philosophical and social demands. Unfortunately, these stressors all seem to converge simultaneously, creating feelings of awkwardness and confusion. Amidst the chaos that marks adolescence there is only one certainty: Change is inevitable.



schoolers begin to pull away from adults, putting a much greater emphasis on friends. Where high school is a time to celebrate uniqueness, adolescents tend to breed a sense of sameness. They act alike, they dress alike, and they will most likely form cliques,

which is an exclusive circle of friends. This tight group of friends gives young people the impression of having unconditional support and more importantly, a sense of belonging.

Middle school students tend to struggle with their identity and experiment with dissimilar roles until they find the right fit. Some shifts can be extreme. The once quiet student suddenly becomes boisterous; the passive person begins to bully others; the smart child starts failing; the student who once clung to his family abruptly wants nothing to do with them. There are so many factors that help fuel these changes.

Who adolescents choose as friends is critical. A great group of peers tends to lift a student up and boost their confidence. A negative group of friends may bring a student down and create abundant opportunities for bad decisions. The saying “birds of a feather flock together” is a perfect analogy for middle school. Given enough time together, many students begin to mimic the behavior of their friends...for better or for worse.

People often think that high schoolers are the ones at-risk for such pitfalls such as gangs, drugs and alcohol. That can be a costly misconception. Middle school is typically the gateway to risky exploration of boundaries. The consequences of these poor choices can be significant and may lead to a continual cycle of negative behavior.

Kids want to be cool. The lingering question is “**how much of themselves are they willing to sacrifice to achieve that status?**”

Compounding these issues is the fact that middle

This edition of the spring newsletter is devoted to exploring some of the issues and insight that are unique to the middle school population.

### Middle School Mindfulness



**Mindfulness** is a type of meditation that involves maintaining a greater awareness of thoughts, sensations, and the surrounding environment. Mindfulness helps students to decompress during the school day.

Many of the School City of Hammond schools use mindfulness practices such as deep breathing and guided relaxation to help students focus and effectively deal with the stress in their lives.



**Never forget that we  
need confusing times of  
epic questioning  
to discover who  
we really are.**

Elite Daily

# Middle vs. Elementary School

There are so many critical differences between elementary and middle school education. The first and foremost relates to the level of **independence**. Elementary settings tend to be a nurturing, supportive and predictable environment. On the other hand, middle school can be structured chaos. Students change classes, have multiple teachers and tend to be less supervised. This sudden jolt into self-sufficiency can be difficult for the new middle school student.



teacher before proceeding. Most young children will follow most rules if they are consistently **frontloaded** effectively.

Middle school students tend to be rebellious. They are often very good at pushing buttons that can incite intense reactions from adults. **They understand the expectations** of the school, but they often try to “push the envelope” to see what they can and can’t get away with.

Another big difference is that middle schools tend to be much **less tolerant of behavioral problems**. There are school rules that everyone must follow. Given the more extreme nature of adolescent behavior, an infraction is less likely to be overlooked or excused.

Finally, there is the issue of **accountability**. Elementary school staff may chalk-up a lot of behaviors to immaturity or a poor fund of knowledge. Middle school students are expected to make good choices and be in control of their actions. Teachers uphold behavioral standards and students are expected to meet them.

In elementary school, **the expectations** are typically spelled out and reviewed every day. Students walk quietly in straight lines and wait for directions from the

**Preparing** a student for middle school is very challenging but educators need to explore different ways to help bridge the two entities so that students can be more successful.

## HAMMOND MIDDLE SCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION

As students transition from elementary school to middle school, one of the most common questions parents ask is “*what type of support will my child receive?*”



The School City of Hammond follows the federal mandates which state that all students attend school in the **least restrictive environment**. Therefore, the level of support provided in the school setting is based on the minimal amount of services the student needs to have appropriate access to the general education curriculum. The level of services can be different for each student.

For students with milder disabilities who are on a diploma track, students attend general education classes while receiving additional special education support. Some middle schools have English/Language Arts and Math courses that are taught specifically by a special education teacher. However, most middle schools are moving to provide only co-taught classrooms. This means that a general education teacher and a special education teacher are both in the same classroom, working together to address a wide variety of student learning styles.

For middle school students with moderate to severe disabilities, the most restrictive programs are currently housed at Scott, Gavit, and Clark Middle Schools. These programs allow for a small-group setting with intensive adult support. The focus of these programs are not on obtaining a high school diploma. The program centers on **Content Connectors** which provide students with exposure to the functional life skills they will need to be as independent as possible post high school.

In addition to co-taught classrooms, middle school schedules are designed to provide an advisory period with their special education teacher of record. This serves as a “check-in and check out” process to monitor individual progress and assist with skill building.

Although students receiving this level of support are typically in their special education classroom the majority of the day, they are encouraged to attend general education classes as determined appropriate by the Case Conference Committee.

For disabled students who require more assistance to address behavioral or emotional challenges, they may have access to a structured classroom that uses positive reinforcement and immediate feedback to help students make better choices. It should be noted that the goal of this program is still to provide students the skills they need to **transition to general education, the least restrictive environment**.

# Autism and Middle School

One of the key characteristics of students with autism is experiencing difficulties when changes are made to their routines and schedules. This makes the shift to middle school that much more challenging for these students. There are a few recommendations that may assist in making the transition to middle school more predictable and successful for students with autism.

First, having administration and special education staff that have received training and understand the typical characteristics of students with autism is critical. When staff and administration have this knowledge, the likelihood that they will use research-based interventions and supports with students on the spectrum increases drastically.

Secondly, it is important that the focus be on academic skills when creating a schedule, not solely on eligibility. Students with autism tend to have specific academic strengths and weaknesses that need to be carefully considered.

Third, the team should review any special accommodations a child may need to be successful. This could include testing in a small group setting, providing the student a copy of lecture notes, having alternate home-

work assignments to reduce writing, or incorporating more technology to compensate for fine motor weaknesses.

Ensuring that these supports are documented in the IEP will help reduce the likelihood of frustration or meltdowns as the student is introduced to a new team of teachers in 6th grade. The IEP should also have details regarding specially designed instruction techniques, a student's behavior plan (if warranted) and any modifications to the middle school environment.

As an extra precaution, it is suggested that the parent email or meet with the teachers prior to the beginning of the school year to review the child's strengths, weaknesses and common triggers. Having the student actually see the school and meet the teachers is a good idea to lessen the stress of the change.

Parents and teachers can also discuss any possible extra-curricular activities that may be of interest, as this will provide something fun to do at the end of the day. This will also encourage friendships and a more positive view of the school.



## Important Middle School Developmental Issues

Besides the obvious physical changes that accompany adolescence, there are other, more subtle processes that are equally as important.

### Thought Process:

Also known as "thinking about thinking" an adolescent begins to pay more attention to their own problem-solving and how their choices effect others. Students can become more organized and their curiosity about the future tends to generate a lot of questions. One of the key questions to answer in regard to this self-exploration is "what do I value or think is important?"

### Communication:

Middle school students start to develop their own language, filled with slang and popular phrases. This is perpetuated by the heavy influence of music and social media. Adolescents start using body language and have a greater understanding about the underlying nuances of communication. Their new found interest in the world may spark a need to debate or argue about current topics.

**The conflict between the need to belong to a group and the need to be seen as unique and individual is the dominant struggle of adolescence.**

Jeanne Elium

### Social:

In their quest to fit in, middle schoolers try different roles until they find the one with which they can identify. The cost of trying to carve out a place in the world also invites a great deal of peer pressure. Bullying tends to peak at this time. Teenagers can get more aggressive with their peers. The victims often suffer in silence, afraid of escalating the alienation.

### Emotional:

The combination of rapid change and confusion can cause many troubled students to make poor choices. They may start self-medicating or reach out to a dubious crowd. Some become more directly self-destructive, engaging in cutting or having suicidal thoughts. As peer relations take top billing in the world, there is an unspoken bond of loyalty and commitment to each other. This involves keeping each others secrets. Sadly, when one of their friends are in trouble, they hesitate to reach out to supportive adults out of a sense of betrayal. This can be a costly mistake and the reason why adults have to build trusting relationships with all students.

# CRISIS RESOURCES IN THE COMMUNITY FOR TROUBLED YOUTH

Adolescence is a very difficult time. The need for independence can sometimes lead to parent/child conflict. This conflict can escalate to unmanageable proportions, leaving hurt feelings and severely damaged family relationships. Thankfully, there are some resources in the community that can help.

**Alternative House** is an emergency shelter for boys and girls, ages 10 to 18, who are runaways, homeless, abused or neglected and need help to resolve problems and successfully return home or to an alternative, safe living situation. The maximum state regulated stay is 20 days. The staff provides group, individual and family counseling at no cost while the youth is in residence at Alternative House and provides free follow-up services for at least six sessions.



Businesses cooperate with the Crisis Center to help youth to safety. Businesses display a **Safe Place** sign indicating they are willing to assist young people. The Crisis Center staff will retrieve youth from the site and transport them to safety at Alternative House.

**Safely Home** is a cooperative effort by the Crisis Center and police safety officers to help youth who are pushed out, left home or on the streets achieve safety and return home.

The **Crisis Center** is a provider for The Indiana Trafficking Victim Assistance Program which works to identify and provide comprehensive services to youth (under 21) victims of trafficking or sexual exploitation.

## NUMBERS YOU SHOULD KNOW!

**RUNAWAY Hotline: 1800.RUNAWAY**

**24 HOUR CRISIS HOTLINE-(219) 938-0900 OR 800-519-0469**



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## ADULTIFICATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS



Middle school children often look like adults physically but from an emotional perspective, most of them are still children. To allow their race or gender to influence our opinion and create faulty assumptions is nothing short of a tragedy.

The study "**Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood,**" by Georgetown Law's **Center on Poverty and Inequality**, (Eipstein, Blake and Gonzalez), shows that society's perception of black girls leads to their adultification. The report shows that adults believe that black girls seem older than white girls of the same age and think that black girls need less nurturing, protection, support and comfort than white girls.

*"Black girls are five times more likely to be suspended as white girls and twice as likely to be suspended as white boys, according to research used in this study. And though they make up less than 16 percent of the female school population, black girls account for 28 percent of referrals to law enforcement and 37 percent of arrests. Black girls are also almost three times more likely than white girls to be referred to the juvenile justice system and 20 percent more likely to be charged with a crime."*

The disturbing practice of adultification is significant **in education** because African American females may not receive the assistance they really need based on the **misconception** that they are more independent and strong. Being overlooked denies them access to school support systems which can mean the difference between success or failure in the school.

### **Moving Forward**

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