The following appendix is an excerpt from *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know* by Trudy Knowles and Dave F. Brown.

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Understanding the Young Adolescent

Being a young adolescent is very cool because you’re going through lots of changes—like, your body is changing and your voice is cracking and it’s a new environment. And I’m meeting lots of people I never met before and switching class. I don’t have recess anymore.

ERIC, AGE THIRTEEN

Early adolescence can be a tough time for children. Their bodies and minds are changing, creating a preoccupation with self-examination as they strive to discover and craft a personality. As the young adolescent begins to foster independence from the family, social interaction with peers becomes very important. It’s not always easy to cope with such rapid and dramatic changes. One thirteen-year-old, Evan, described the difficulty he experienced: “It’s a really tough time. You’re not a teenager but you’re not a baby. I think it would be easier if you were an adult or younger.”

Creating a school environment that is responsive to the changing needs of young adolescents requires an understanding of their developmental changes. More importantly, however, it requires an understanding of how young adolescents perceive those changes. Their perceptions become their reality.
Understanding the Young Adolescent

Here is how Lindsay, an eighth grade student, describes herself in both poetry and art.

What's on the Inside

I am an artist,
who draws what she feels, sees, and encounters,
I need love from my friends and family,
I need affection to help me be successful in life,
I want to be all I can be,
To do this I will work hard to achieve,
I am human,
I make mistakes and learn from them,
I will not give up and therefore,
I will be the best by being me.

LINDSAY HAMILTON

Lindsay's self-description
What is happening to these young people? This chapter will explore the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional changes that occur in young adolescents, and pave the way for our discussion of a school environment that is responsive to these changes. By understanding their needs and listening to their perceptions, perhaps we can be more responsive to their reality.

### Time for Reflection

Dig through some old pictures of yourself and find one from your middle school years. Write a few thoughts about how you felt about yourself during that time of your life.

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**Physical Development**

The greatest problem for middle schoolers is growing up too fast.

_Bessie, age thirteen_

I’ve changed physically. I’ve gotten so out of shape. I come home so tired every day. All I want to do is eat. I gained twenty pounds this year.

_Dan, age twelve_

Photo day arrives at Smith Middle School. Students line up from shortest to tallest and march into the gym to have their pictures taken. There they stand: from four feet nine inches to six feet two inches. Six months ago, they were much more similar in size. What is happening to these kids?

It’s puberty—a word that strikes fear in the hearts of parents and confusion in the hearts of the young adolescent. When does it start? When does it end? Does puberty start when the physical changes begin? For some that may be as early as ten or as late as fifteen. Does it start when the child goes to middle school? That may be fifth, sixth, or sev-
enth grade. If we can’t even define when it starts, how will we know how to address it?

Physical development is one of the overriding concerns of young adolescents. Looking at themselves in every mirror they can find, they will often see an alien body staring back. Whether it’s in the bathroom mirror at home or the one hung in their locker, the reflection in the window of a car, the door knob to their classroom, or cafeteria spoon, middle school students watch themselves, convinced that everyone else is watching them too. They want to know, “Am I normal?”

A story a former school administrator tells emphasizes the need young adolescents have for self-examination (Blackburn 1999). A middle school principal was receiving complaints from teachers in the building that students were constantly asking for the restroom pass during class time. Annoyed by the students’ need to leave the room during lessons, the teachers were looking for solutions. The perceptive principal asked the central office administrator to purchase mirrors for every classroom. The mirrors were placed strategically inside the door of each classroom. The result was an amazing drop in the number of student requests for restroom breaks.

Young adolescents’ concerns about their bodies are manifested in social and emotional reactions that may affect their ability to learn. Our understanding of physical development is vital, therefore, if we want to create an environment conducive to learning. The rate of physical development in young adolescents may vary from one student to the next, but there are common mileposts.

**Physical Changes**

**The Growth Spurt**

Beginning at about age ten for girls and twelve for boys, individuals experience a growth spurt of the skeletal and muscular systems. The sequences of the changes tend to be somewhat consistent, although individual variations occur. What is less standardized is the age and speed at which the changes happen (Tanner 1972).

Height gain may be as much as four or more inches a year in young adolescents, with usually two years of fast growth followed by three
years of slow steady growth. That could mean the addition of ten to twenty inches in just five years. Average height gain during adolescence for females is seven inches; for males, it is nine to ten inches.

Weight gains equal eight to ten pounds a year. Many young adolescents gain as much as forty to fifty pounds before it’s all over. One middle schooler told us, “I gained ten pounds in six months. I’m not too proud of that.” Another student added, “In the last year I’ve grown a lot—four or five inches.”

Skeletal and Muscular Changes
A defining characteristic of the physical development of young adolescents is rapid and uneven skeletal change. The bones in the legs may grow when nothing else seems to be growing, giving young adolescents the appearance of being all legs. The feet may grow while height remains constant. Arms may lengthen while the torso stays the same. The hands may seem disproportionately large.

The result is “the awkward stage.” In June of one year, the body is well proportioned; the student is an exceptional athlete. The following June, the child is lanky and graceless. What happened to the physical coordination of just a year before?

To complicate matters further, bone growth tends to surpass muscle growth (Tanner 1972). This variable development is significant particularly in physical education and sports programs, where kids are often encouraged to lift weights and throw curve balls when their muscles cannot sustain the effort.

Van Hoose and Strahan (1988) report that another result of the changing skeletal structure of young adolescents is that the three tailbones fuse and harden into their final adult form. It is a process that can cause pain and discomfort. Eric reports that, “Sometimes when the teachers are not looking, I need to stand.” When Tom, age thirteen, was asked what we would change about school, he commented, “I would change the chairs. We have hard rock chairs and it hurts after awhile.”

Long bones, awkwardness, underdeveloped muscles, pain in the tailbone, huge feet, long hands; no wonder the young adolescent is concerned. Despite these uncomfortable growing pains, we put them in a school setting where they have to sit for most of the day.
Hormones have gotten a bad rap in discussions about young adolescents; they are often blamed for behaviors that many adults don’t seem to understand. It is true that hormones play a powerful role in development. If we understand their role, we can better understand young adolescent behaviors.

The body prepares for full sexual maturity during early adolescence, resulting in reproductive capability. Males and females experience increases in the amount of the hormones testosterone and estradiol during puberty that affect sexual development. The most dramatic increase for males is in testosterone—levels of this hormone are sometimes eighteen times what they were before puberty. The primary increase for females is in the hormone estradiol—levels are approximately eight times what they were before puberty (Nottelmann et al. 1987). During early adolescence, these hormonal changes result in the development of primary and secondary sex characteristics.

Primary characteristics are those changes that occur in preparing the body for full reproductive capability. In females, the major benchmark is menstruation—accompanied by the fear in girls that they’ll be the last in their peer group to experience it. The primary characteristic for males is testicle and penile growth. Finally, males experience their first ejaculation, alone, at night, under the covers: fully experienced, rarely discussed.

Secondary characteristics include physical changes not necessarily related to reproduction. Secondary sex characteristics for females include breast development—often accompanied by behavioral changes such as the wearing of baggy shirts, the adoption of an erect, proud walk, or a slumping of the shoulders in an effort to conceal development; the growth of pubic and underarm hair; and rounding of the hips. Changes for males include facial, underarm, and pubic hair growth, and the ever embarrassing lowering of the voice.
Changes in reproductive maturity are beginning earlier than in past generations. For example, in the United States in 1900 the average age of a female’s first menstruation was just over fourteen years. The average age today is slightly over twelve (Santrock and Yussen 1992). Earlier development results in physically mature boys and girls without the cognitive and emotional maturity necessary to understand those changes.

The sex hormones are not the only hormones undergoing changes. Hormonal secretions dictated by the pituitary gland also increase, often in an irregular way. For example, sudden secretions of adrenaline into the body from the adrenal gland could make the young adolescent want to run around the school building ten times just when asked to sit and do a worksheet. At other times the gland is underactive, resulting in lethargy (Van Hoose and Strahan 1988). Peter, a sixth grader, describes the result of these physical changes; “One of the hardest things for me is just waking up in the morning and going through the day without pulses of tiredness. Sometimes I get real restless because I get really tired.”

Sweat glands also become very active, explaining why classroom windows are frequently open even in the dead of winter. Active sweat glands also contribute to oily hair and the development of that scourge of adolescent—acne.

*The Appetite—Insatiable and Peculiar*
Young adolescents have high nutrient requirements due to the rapid growth of the skeletal system and other physical changes. It is not uncommon for a young adolescent to eat continuously from the time they get home from school until bedtime. Unfortunately, due to the cultural prevalence of fast food, many of these kids are not eating foods that give them the maximum benefit. In addition, in schools that serve lunch at 10:30, students may not be getting the appropriate nutrition they need for effective learning later in the day.

*Developmental Variations*

*Gender Distinctions*
Girls’ growth spurts peak about two years earlier than boys’ (average age twelve for girls, compared with fourteen for boys). Attend a mid-
Middle school dance, and you will observe this phenomenon firsthand: five-foot-five-inch girls dancing with five-foot-one-inch boys. Suddenly girls are taller, stronger, and more mature than boys.

Middle school girls seem to struggle more with their physical changes and tend to be more concerned with physical appearance. The result is a lowering of self-esteem as well as an increase in self-consciousness (Simmons and Blyth 1987). This concern undoubtedly has something to do with gender stereotypes, put forward by the media, dictating that females should be attractive while boys should be rugged. Media images remain a powerful force. Rarely do adult perspectives have the kind of influence that peer opinions and advertising campaigns have on young adolescent minds.

Individual Differences
Young adolescent development does not follow a strict timeline. Individual differences occur both between and within each gender. Everyone is developing at a different rate and yet everyone is on track. These variations make it difficult for young adolescents to find someone with whom to compare their bodies. How do they know if they are all right—if they are “normal”? Joel Milgram (1992) explains: “The pace of the physical changes taking place is different for each child and for each sex. In the egocentric, comparative world of the young adolescent, these differences are generally translated into feelings of inadequacy and deficiency. . . . It is important to remember that all adolescents at one time or another feel badly about some part of their bodies” (19).

Not surprisingly, talking about the physical changes seems to be more difficult for the young adolescent than talking about newfound friends, mood swings, or what they’d like to see their teachers do in the classroom. The physical changes have such a dramatic impact on emotions, learning, and social interactions that discussing them can make perceived inadequacies seem even more real. Think back on your own early adolescence. How willing were you and your friends to discuss breast development, underarm hair, wet dreams, or vocal changes? Instead, less emotionally charged issues like shoe size tend to be discussed instead of the more serious topics that affect an individual’s sense of self.
Impact of Physical Changes

The middle school years are a time of personal criticism. Due to the young adolescent's ever increasing self-awareness, the timing of certain physical changes can and does heavily impact self-consciousness. Young adolescents can be found carefully examining themselves as their curiosity becomes aroused by these physical changes.

Ask seven-year-olds about the growth of their bodies and typically they'll express disinterest. Four years later the young adolescent is obsessed by these physical transformations. Few adults have positive memories about the way they looked during young adolescence. M. R. Wright, in a 1989 study of body image in adolescence, commented, “Preoccupation with one’s body image is strong throughout adolescence, but it is especially acute during puberty, a time when adolescents are more dissatisfied with their bodies than in late adolescence.”

Debate continues over whether early or late maturers experience more difficulties. In her study of 335 adolescents over a three-year period from sixth through eighth grade and during their last year of high school, Petersen (1987) found that late or early maturation affected individual satisfaction with appearance. She reported that studies conducted in the 1960s found that early-maturing males were more successful at peer relations during middle and high school. These individuals excelled in athletics, demonstrated confidence in social situations, and became the school leaders. The studies showed, furthermore, that when the late-maturing boys reached their thirties, they had a stronger sense of identity. Girls in the seventh and eighth grades seemed less satisfied if they were early maturers. Although these girls were seen as more popular, at a personal level they were often self-conscious and insecure. Petersen’s study also showed that early maturers tended to get higher grades. Could this be due to teachers’ perceptions of performance based on physical development?

But dealing with the young adolescent’s self-image is not simply a matter of identifying whether a child is an early or late maturer. As Tanner (1972) reports, “There is little doubt that being an early or late maturer may have repercussions on behavior, and that in some children these repercussions may be considerable” (19). Teachers must be
aware of the facts of development and be ready and willing to discuss developmental issues with their students and, perhaps, with students’ parents. Students must be made aware that they are developing normally, whatever their rate or sequence of physical maturation.

Physical development is only one aspect to consider when looking at the young adolescent. Although physical changes are the most obvious and visible of the changes, it is the impact of physical maturation on emotional and social development that has the greatest influence on how young adolescents view themselves, school life, and those around them.

**Intellectual Development**

Early adolescence is a time when intellectual functioning frequently changes due to brain growth and increasing neural connections as well as an expanding social world. Young adolescents tend to be intensely curious; they also display a wide range of skills and abilities. Just what are they thinking?

**Piaget’s Findings**

Jean Piaget (1977a) provides us with perhaps the clearest picture of what may be happening cognitively and intellectually to the young adolescent. Piaget developed a theory about how people make sense of their world. In this process, he identified four stages of intellectual development. Each of the stages reflects characteristics related to a person’s cognitive ability with respect to object perception. The stages are: sensorimotor (birth to two years), preoperational (two to seven years), concrete operational (seven to eleven years) and formal operational (twelve years to adulthood). Individuals pass through each stage in sequence, but at varying rates.

With the young adolescent we are most concerned with the stages of concrete and formal operations. In the concrete stage, students can classify and order objects, reverse processes, think of more than one thing at a time, and think logically about concrete objects. They still need direct experiences and do better with real as opposed to abstract
objects or thought. Middle level students in this concrete state of cognitive growth are better able to cognitively grasp abstract principles when ideas are taught with the use of hands-on activities and materials rather than presented in a lecture or by reading a textbook. Middle level teachers should stock their classrooms with many genuine objects (manipulatives) that help students to actually touch and see the concepts that they are learning. Although manipulatives, role-playing and hands-on activities are important during all stages, they are particularly important during the concrete stage.

In the formal operational stage, students have developed the capability of solving abstract and hypothetical problems. According to Piaget (1977a), “This period is characterized in general by the conquest of a new mode of reasoning, one that is no longer limited exclusively to dealing with objects or directly representable realities, but also employs hypotheses” (33). Elements of formal thought include the following:

1. An increased ability to think in hypothetical ways about abstract ideas as well as to generate and test hypotheses systematically. When asked how his thinking had changed, Rob (age fourteen) responded, “I think I examine problems more and try to put the problem with something else I already know.”
2. An ability to think about the future and, therefore, to plan and explore—hence middle school students’ sudden preoccupation with life plans and their concern for the world around them.
3. Metacognition, or the ability to reflect on one’s thoughts. Caine and Caine (1994) describe metacognition as “thinking about the way we think, feel and act” (160). When a seventh grader doesn’t understand something, he/she can suddenly think about not understanding. Such thinking may not lead to understanding and may in fact lead to frustration. Indeed, many of the frustrations middle school students experience may result from this new reflective thought—this thinking about thinking. They may even worry about why they are thinking about their thinking.
For the early adolescent, the growth of metacognitive abilities generates greater understanding of abstract principles and results in more meaningful learning. The development of these self-reflective processes may not always be focused on academics. Young adolescents simultaneously become focused on social concerns, physical growth changes, and emotional and moral issues.

4. Idealism, expanded possibilities, and expansion of thoughts. The middle school student’s mind is suddenly open to a myriad of ideas, solutions, and imaginings. The ability to think hypothetically produces unconstrained thoughts and a sense of unlimited possibilities. “Reality” is no longer the benchmark of thought, having been overtaken instead by “what is possible.”

Moving from Concrete to Formal Thought Processes

Implications for Instruction

In studying Piaget’s theory, we can assume that most students will be in the concrete operational stage as they enter middle school and experience periods of formal operational thought by the time they leave. Middle school then becomes a period of cognitive transition. Although this idea sounds good in theory, many students remain primarily in the concrete operations stage of development throughout their middle school careers, with only about one-third of eighth graders consistently demonstrating an ability to use formal operations (Piaget 1977b). Lounsbury and Clark (1990) indicate that academically talented eighth graders often experience confusion because they are in the process of adjusting to and accommodating more powerful cognitive strategies. An eighth-grade teacher describes the frustration in teaching young adolescents: “I think my biggest challenge is getting all the kids in the class to reach the same conclusions and the same level of thinking—which I can’t do. So, when I have a question as to why something happens, I have some kids who are wondering what’s happened.”

Variations among students are common. So are variations in individuals with respect to different subject areas. The young adolescent
may be capable of abstract thinking in mathematics yet not be able to set up a scientific experiment. Students at this stage move back and forth between concrete and formal operational thought. These variations have great implications for instruction, as Van Hoose and Strahan (1988) noted: “Planning instruction is like shooting at a moving target due to rapid, individual changes” (16).

Egocentrism
One aspect of young adolescents’ thinking is a new form of egocentrism. Unlike the egocentrism of younger children, who assume that others think the same way they do about everything, young adolescents begin to understand that people have different beliefs and attitudes. They become immersed in their own thinking. They reflect on and analyze their thoughts and assume that everyone is as interested in their ideas as they are. A typical thought process is, “Because I am thinking about me, then everyone must be thinking about me. Because I notice my hair, everyone else must be looking at it. Since I pay attention to myself, everyone else must be paying attention to me.”

Another result of expanding thought processes is the sense of personal uniqueness and infallibility. Middle school students are certain that no one has ever thought the thoughts they are thinking or felt the feelings they are feeling. As they get caught up in their personal worlds, young adolescents can become removed from reality and begin to feel indestructible. The belief that “it won’t happen to me” contributes to risk-taking behaviors.

When students are given opportunities to test out possibilities and try out new ideas during the middle school years, they become less egocentric and more realistic. During middle and late adolescence, a more balanced perspective is usually achieved.

The Curiosity Factor
Middle school students are learners in the purest sense of the word. Based on a developing capacity for abstract thinking, middle school students are curious about life and highly inquisitive about everything life has to offer. They challenge principles that don’t fit their view of
the way things work. This curiosity leads to the desire to participate in practical problem solving and activities that reflect real issues. The curiosity factor is reflected clearly in the following poem written by a college student reflecting on his middle school years.

**I Wanna Know**

I wanna know
How trees are made
And why money’s paid

I wanna know
How stars are so bright
And why lights light

I wanna know
How animals mate
And why people hate.

I wanna know
How pollution starts
And why mountains fall apart.

I wanna know
How people breathe
And why birds fly with ease.

I wanna know!

RICHARD BORDEAUX

The bodies of young adolescents are physically maturing; their minds are thinking in ways that they have never been able to think before. Both of those developmental changes affect social interactions and impact the young adolescent’s emotional life.

**Social Development**

At a time when dramatic physical and intellectual changes are occurring, children are taken from the safety and security of the self-contained elementary school and put in an alien environment. They
often go to larger schools that include students they’ve never met before. They change classes and are responsible for being at certain places at certain times. As frightening as this new setting appears, it also provides the exciting and challenging prospect of meeting new people and gaining increased control of their lives. Bordeaux (1993) reflects on this prospect in the following poem.

Finding a Place In the Group

Alone
In the back of the room
with this growing sense of doom
Laughter to the left of me
Smiling to the right.
Alone in the middle
No land in sight
Drowning in fright
Hey, somebody
Anybody
throw me a line
and I’ll be fine
I’ll pull myself in
Show you what’s within
Give you the straight poop
And maybe
Just maybe
Find my place in the group.

Sheila, a seventh grader, was asked what she liked best about middle school. She responded, “Coming and seeing my friends and stuff.” When asked what was the most important thing to learn in school Peter responded, “How to make friends and how to act. Some people are just naturally more popular than others and they make friends more easily for some reason. But I think if you’re not one of those people you have to learn the harder way—worrying about if people like you, or hate you, or whatever.” Eric, also a seventh grader, agreed. “Social abilities are the most important thing to do and learn—getting
in touch with the world and knowing what’s going on and being able to talk in front of people.”

Their teachers agree. When asked about the most important thing a middle school student should do or learn in school their responses are surprisingly similar: “How to get along”; “Social interactions along with social responsibility”; “Socialization”; “Social interaction with fellow peers and adults.” Although academics remain important in preparing these students for life, teachers acknowledge the vital role that socialization plays during the middle school years. The tremendous social needs of the middle school student should be taken into account in designing the structure, curriculum, and instruction of middle schools.

**The Role of the Family**

In their attempt to move from dependence to independence, the social affiliations of the young adolescent broaden, with allegiance split between the family and the peer group. Although authority remains primarily with the family, young adolescents want to begin making their own choices about what to do and who to do it with. Never before has the child had an opportunity to make the kinds of choices that are being offered in middle school.

Parents begin to lose their omnipotence and are no longer infallible in the eyes of their child. Suddenly the parents don’t know all the answers to the homework questions and their behaviors can be seen by the young adolescent as inappropriate. Parents are an embarrassment.

The early adolescent struggles with the conflict inherent in the need to depend on parents for support as they move toward independence. The seventh grader who occasionally asks her parents for assistance in doing homework may request that her father drop her off a block away from school to ensure that he not embarrass her in front of her friends. At the end of the day, when the father returns to the same intersection to pick his daughter up, she chastises him for not driving to the school building to retrieve her.

In order to conform to the desires of a new social group, early adolescents may appear to renounce any loyalty they previously had to
parents. As peers gain importance, the young adolescent, in an attempt to try out new roles, may reject directions or suggestions from the family and challenge previously held beliefs that the parents had so carefully inculcated. Although other adults may continue to have a strong influence, the young adolescent desires and searches for increased decision-making opportunities. Parents become confused about whether to offer assistance or let the child alone.

Despite the young adolescent’s apparent rejection of parental authority, parents continue to play a primary role in the young adolescent’s life. When asked who the most important person was in their life, young adolescents we interviewed almost universally picked one or both of their parents:

“I’d say my dad. He always helps me. He’ll help me understand things better like in school.”

“My parents. They pretty much make you the person you are. If you’re little, they guide you. They teach you your manners, they teach you what to do.”

“My parents. They teach me the important lessons.”

“My parents because I love them so much. They take good care of me and they’re nice to me.”

“I think my parents. I have a really close relationship with them. I definitely think they help me a lot. I really look up to them.”

“My mother because two years ago my dad died, and my mother had to take over two parts of the family.”

“My parents because they kind of explain things to me.”

Young adolescents need stability and security in a world that sometimes seems upside-down and is certainly confusing. Although parents may be equally confused, they can provide the stability and security that the child needs.

The Role of Peers

Making friends at the middle school level is probably one of the first true choices a child has the opportunity to make. The child doesn’t get
to choose his or her parents or where to go to school. During elementary school, friends were usually those who lived in your neighborhood or attended your elementary school. Prior to this time the only models of behavior were family members, teachers, adults in the community, and maybe sports or entertainment stars.

A whole new world opens up during middle school. This expanding social landscape creates questions in young adolescents’ minds about how to get peers to like them. They begin to see that some kids are popular while others aren’t. They wonder how that happens, and how they can become part of the popular group. They question where they stand and wonder how their peers think of them (Rice 1999).

The young adolescents’ world has changed: new lifestyles, ways of thinking, values, and ideas are continually presented. The peer group is the primary source of new standards and models of behavior. Being part of the group helps young adolescents develop different points of view and try out new ideas. Experimenting with different ways of thinking and behaving is a vital component of the search for personal identity. Peers aid in this development by offering feedback on clothes, appearance, behavior, and anything else that interests them. The feedback allows young adolescents to gauge their new patterns of behavior in search for what fits.

The desire for peer approval is an extension of the desire to have their personal choices validated. The group also allows young adolescents to cover up what they believe are inadequacies. Since young adolescents no longer know what is normal, they lean heavily on peers to provide a structure for new behaviors and count on their peers to lead them in the right direction. This conformity to behavioral norms can have both positive and negative ramifications.

Initially in middle school, the need for companionship and social interaction leads students to develop same-sex friendships. Although interest in the opposite sex emerges, often in the form of what is called puppy love, same-sex affiliation continues to dominate and is preferred by the middle school student (Milgram 1992). Sex roles begin to change but it is often the parents, teachers, other adults, or the media that encourage that change and stress opposite-sex relationships. Informal and sometimes formal dances encourage young adolescents to form
relationships at a time when they may prefer friendly interactions, long phone calls, mixed group activities, and casual flirting.

Peer pressure is real to the young adolescent. During this stage, as young adolescents try to fit in, they become impressionable to what other people have to say about them, particularly if it is negative. One student, when asked about peer pressure said, “You gotta fit in so you get good friends.”

When asked what the greatest problem for middle school students is, Celeste, an eighth grader, responded, “Smoking, peer pressure, and trying to fit in.” Her friend Melissa continued, “A few (students) got caught with marijuana; someone got suspended for carrying a pack of cigarettes; I also think graffiti—people draw on the walls. People were dyeing their hair with markers.”

Why do they engage in such behaviors? To be accepted by a group. Parents may not approve, but middle schoolers are more encouraged by the approval of their peers than the disapproval of their parents. When asked what the biggest problem middle school students have to face, Eric, age thirteen, said, “Not getting along with kids. Having them tease you.”

Although parents and teachers worry about the peer pressures that lead to destructive behaviors, peer pressure can be equally positive when the peer approval focuses on academic success or encourages participation in plays, sports, clubs, or other activities. Being a member of a social group is, in fact, a vital link in learning successful adult social interactions.

The Role of the Community

In addition to the need for successful peer interaction comes an increased awareness of the broader social world with an accompanying concern for social justice.

The young adolescents’ sense of right and wrong is intense. If you want to find a solution to a social problem, give it to a group of middle school students. Their new awareness of the world around them, a need to be involved with their peers, and a mind that is open to all possibilities allow them to seek and act on solutions that are seemingly out of
the realm of adult thought. Their new cognitive thinking skills come unimpaired by experiences of failure that often impede adults in devising solutions.

Although parents may be relegated to a lesser role in the influence they hold over their young adolescent children, these same children will listen to and emulate other adults. Whether it be teachers, parents of their friends, or community members, adults have the opportunity to influence and lead the young adolescent in positive directions. Their letter-writing campaigns, canned food drives, volunteering, and political activism provide a wide range of experiences and a sense of empowerment and meaning within the group—all essential elements in young adolescent growth.

The Role of the Media

The adolescent’s world cannot be understood without considering the enormous power of the mass media, especially television, but also movies and popular music. Together with the increasing penetration of cable television, videocassette recorders, and computers in American homes and schools, these electronic conduits for programming and advertising have become strong competitors to the traditional societal institutions in shaping young people’s attitudes and values.

CARNEGIE COUNCIL (1996, 41)

The above statement was made a mere four years ago, and as we embrace a new millennium, the Internet, as well, has become a powerful lure for youth. The media in all its forms can have positive or negative effects on the young adolescent. Because they are susceptible to media advertising, young adolescents must become aware of the impact that it has in their lives. Often it is the media that defines for these children whether they are worthy or not—whether they are normal. The media tells them that they are too thin, too fat, too tall, not athletic enough, not hip enough to the latest fashion trends.

The impact of the media cannot and should not be underrated. With access to the World Wide Web increasing, the information flow is unprecedented and endless. Helping young adolescents understand
its power as well as its pitfalls, its ability to engage as well as to addict, its wide source of accurate as well as erroneous information, becomes a daunting but vital task for parents and educators.

Despite interest in conforming and belonging to a social group, young adolescents still want individuality. The need for confirmation by a social group is really a need for personal validation.

**Emotional Development**

The middle school student confronts a diverse number of changes all at one time:

- accepting physical changes
- experiencing new modes of intellectual functioning
- striving for independence from the family
- trying to become a person with a unique identity
- adjusting to a new school setting
- relating to new friends

This period of transition between dependence and independence results in a multitude of needs and a dramatic change in self-concept. The physical changes themselves and the hormones that cause them often trigger emotions that are variable and little understood. Learning to be part of a social group is an important part of the successful transition to independence. More vital, perhaps, are attempts to understand the “self.”

When Rob, a fourteen-year-old eighth grader, was asked what the most important thing to learn at school was, he commented, “Not caring what other people think. Most people, if they get made fun of, they’d take it personally. I’ve learned, and a lot of people make fun of me, that if you don’t care, you have a lot more fun because you’re not trying to impress people. It’s getting your own style.” When Rob was asked, however, to comment on the biggest problem facing middle school students, he replied, “Making your presence known.” Like other young adolescents, Rob is developing his self-concept and self-esteem. Although we sense that Rob is socially well adjusted, he feels the need to
develop a strong sense of identity and begs for personal acceptance as well as the acknowledgment of himself apart from the group—as an individual.

*The Search for Identity*

Identity is a patchwork of flesh, feelings and ideas held together by the string of the moment.

**Richard Bordeaux** (1993)

_Erikson’s Theories_

The search for identity is the defining characteristic of the young adolescent. The first comprehensive look at identity during early adolescence was done by Erik Erikson during the 1950s and 1960s (Erikson 1950, 1968). According to Erikson, during adolescence, individuals struggle to find out who they are and where they are going in life. Young adolescents are just beginning this struggle, trying to integrate their childhood experiences with their developing bodies and biological drives, their new thinking capacities and their ever expanding social roles. This search for identity doesn’t begin and end during early adolescence. It involves a slow searching for a lifestyle that is compatible with physical changes, intellectual understandings, and social interactions.

When asked about the greatest problem middle school students experience, Jesse, an eighth grader, responded, “I think it’s definitely that people want to fit in—they don’t want to stand alone. But I think it’s also important to be an individual, too. There are a lot of cliques in middle school. People get into little groups and I think that’s bad because you need to stand as an individual.”

This search for identity in the young adolescent often revolves around trying out new ideas and behaviors that would have seemed incomprehensible only a year before. It involves looking at situations through different points of view and making decisions about how to act in a given situation in an attempt to develop a public self that is congruent with the inner self and is validated by peers and society. Those decisions, never etched in stone, become the foundation of an identity
that is ever changing throughout life. Those not measuring up to cultural and societal expectations may develop negative identities in order to be acknowledged by a peer group and recognized by society.

Identity development poses additional problems for minorities. How does one develop a sense of self within a dominant culture whose values may be contradictory to those of one’s personal culture? Not only do minorities and young adolescents of color have to deal with general developmental issues, they must develop an ethnic identity (Gay 1994). Gay indicates, “A clarified ethnic identity is central to the psycho-social well-being and educational success of youth of color” (151). She goes on to say, “If ethnic identity development is understood as part of the natural ‘coming of age’ process during early adolescence, and if middle level education is to be genuinely client-centered for students of color, then ethnic sensitivity must be incorporated into school policies, programs, and practices” (153).

Teachers must deliberately create learning environments that attend to cultural, ethnic, and racial issues. As we talk about appropriate middle school practices in this book, we will present a framework for curriculum and instruction that responds to these issues.

Marcia’s Theory
James Marcia (1980) expanded on Erikson’s idea of identity, using the notions of crisis and commitment. Crisis is defined as “a period of exploring alternatives” and commitment as “making choices.” Marcia identifies four resolutions to the search for identity.

1. **Identity diffusion**—no exploration and no commitment. Students neither explore nor choose from the options available to them. They do not question alternatives or act. Someone is making decisions for them. Parents could choose their after-school activities, their friends, and their clothes. This situation is often the case for elementary school children and it is what young adolescents are struggling against.

2. **Identity foreclosure**—commitment without exploration. Here, a choice is made about a lifestyle in the absence of opportunities to explore alternatives. Early maturers who become great
athletes in the middle grades may experience identity foreclosure. These students have been defined by their physical precociousness and either have not been given the opportunity to explore other options or have chosen not to.

We should consider that perhaps many of the risk taking and sometimes dangerous behaviors that young adolescents choose to engage in might be the result of their need to explore life and all its options when they feel that their options are being denied. Teachers must be careful about labeling students prematurely; for example as great athletes, musicians, scholars, or leaders, thus denying the opportunity for these students to experience a variety of options for their lives and perhaps denying other students the opportunity to become an athlete, musician, scholar, or leader.

3. Moratorium—exploration but no commitment. Students search and explore without making a commitment to a lifestyle. Ideally, middle school students should be at this stage. The existence of options and opportunities allows students to explore areas they might not have considered before. For example, providing musical or athletic opportunities for the late maturer may open a career that expands as maturation unfolds. All students who want to be in plays, sing in the chorus, play in the jazz band, cheer at ball games, or join the science club should be allowed to participate in these activities.

4. Achievement—exploration of roles followed by commitment to a specific identity. Identity achievement will not occur during the middle school years. Throughout high school, college, and into early adulthood, opportunities should exist for people to explore options and make decisions and choices about their futures.

For students of color, these stages also become part of the search for an ethnic identity. From little exploration of ethnicity (identity diffusion), to nonexploration in which identity is defined by others (foreclosure), to a time when exploration is embraced (moratorium), to the development of an ethnic identity (achievement), the young adolescent
of color must go through a dual process of self-identification and cultural identification (Gay 1994).

Marcia’s theory, although not universally accepted, does provide us with a view of how the process of identity development may occur and how we can better help the young adolescent explore the many options the world has to offer. Too often we push students into making choices. We limit opportunities rather than opening them up. We let only the “best” be part of the jazz band or choral group. Only those who demonstrate acting ability can be in the play. When we limit opportunities we pass on the message that a certain student is not capable enough, good enough, strong enough, or smart enough to make a contribution. Our job is to provide opportunities, not deny them. Middle school students should never be told they are inadequate. They just might believe it!

**Mood Swings**

Eric, a thirteen-year-old seventh grader, was having a particularly rough evening. He had gone to school that morning his typical bouncy self. That evening, he lay around on the couch with his dog at his side, staring into space. Questions by his mom brought monosyllabic responses, “Yes,” “No,” “Nothing.” Pressured by her concern about what was wrong, he finally said to her, thanks to his school’s comprehensive health curriculum and class unit on self-esteem, “Don’t worry, Mom. I’m an adolescent now. I’m supposed to have mood swings.”

Mood swings are a quintessential characteristic of young adolescence. Emotions change rapidly. Students are happy one moment and angry or sad the next; quiet one day and loud and boisterous the next; terrified with respect to one issue and overconfident about another; anxious on Monday and self-assured on Tuesday.

Too often mood swings are blamed on hormones and are discounted as temporary aberrations. Although we can attribute some mood swings to chemical imbalances or rapid fluctuations of hormones, that’s only part of it. If we consider the wide social and intellectual changes young adolescents are experiencing, their emotional variability seems understandable.
Behavior Issues

Yes, the search for meaning and identity can be a difficult—even traumatic—experience. Young adolescents face a constant concern about whether they are normal; a dissatisfaction with who they are, how they look, what they believe; a belief that something is wrong with their physical development. It’s no wonder that young adolescents exhibit behaviors that seem at times contradictory, bizarre, dangerous, or just plain rude.

Young adolescents can be kind and compassionate and mercilessly cruel. Sensitive to criticism and easily offended, they may become unhappy and take their frustrations out on others: family members, teachers, and especially their classmates. Insults, name calling, and pejorative labeling occur often among students. Celeste, an eighth grader, described one incident between students: “We have some retarded people in this school. A couple of days ago I saw this girl and she was saying, ‘Get out of my way you stupid people!’ Oh my gosh, that is so mean. I could never say anything like that.”

Young adolescents’ feelings of inadequacy and attempts to gain control over their constantly changing environments prompt much of their inappropriate behavior. Students find ways of protecting themselves. Lashing out against others is often the chosen path of self-protection. When asked about problems for their age group, Sarah, a seventh grader, reported, “People take it [their frustrations] out on school, their friends, their school life. . . . They make their lives miserable for themselves instead of making them better.”

On the other hand, middle schoolers can be intensely loyal to their peers, team, parents, and family. Behavior is also subject to wild fluctuation. One never quite knows what to expect—except for the fact that if we wait a while, it will change.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem often suffers due to the changes young adolescents experience during the middle school years. The self-consciousness that accompanies this stage of growth originates in the young person’s perceived loss of control over his or her environment. If students are
unable to establish positive feelings about themselves and develop healthy relationships with their peers, young adolescents are likely to feel alienated and may eventually choose to drop out of school (Mills, Dunham, and Alpert 1988). Rob, age fourteen, jokingly tells his friends, teachers, and family, “Seventy percent of middle school kids suffer from low self-esteem and you’re contributing to the problem.” Rob acknowledges that his statistics may be in error but senses among his peers the need for affirmation and success.

Young adolescence brings with it life’s first identity crisis, in which students attempt to project an image consistent with the inner self, which they hope will be accepted by others who make up their world. Young adolescents’ concerns are real, their problems are unique to them, and their bravado often masks fear and anxiety. Middle schools must provide opportunities for students to understand the growth they are experiencing and be given chances to exercise their independence in supportive ways. Bessie, a seventh grader, stated the needs of young adolescents quite clearly: “My least favorite thing about school is being told what to do. I think that if you’re going to find out what it means to grow up you need to make your own decisions.”

Concluding Reflections

This chapter was meant to provide insight into the multitude of changes that young adolescents face throughout their middle school years and the impact of these changes. Keith recalled his middle school experience in a statement he wrote as a college junior. “Overall, as I look back, it [young adolescence] wasn’t so bad. Back then, though, I probably would not have agreed with that statement. Every aspect—my friends, family, school, emotional and physical changes—all greatly affected me while I was growing up.”

As we work with young adolescents, we must be aware of these changes. It is a time of transition between dependence and independence, a time to explore new alternatives and try out new identities, a time to experiment with new points of view, and a time to learn how to interact with others. Although often seemingly chaotic and confusing, it is their time.
Think about these possibilities:

- What if we truly supported and encouraged young adolescents in their quest to develop a self?
- What if we based schooling on the knowledge of early adolescent development?
- What if we designed a school that acknowledges the physical changes that these students are going through?
- What if we developed a curriculum that responded to their changing intellectual and social worlds?
- What if we provided an environment that supported their need for social interactions and emotional stability?
- What if we listened to what they said?
- What if their questions became our questions?
- What if . . . ?

References

BLACKBURN, JAMES. 1999. Conversation with the authors, West Chester, PA, 12 March.


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