stuck in the middle

by Larry Widen

If you're the parent of a middle-schooler, you may wonder what he's **thinking**, since he doesn't seem to talk much to you. In recent interviews, 14 area middle-schoolers open up and show themselves to be **thoughtful, articulate** and **introspective** about their lives.

The 18th century author Washington Irving once said, "There is a certain relief in change. I have found in traveling in a stagecoach, that it is often a comfort to shift one's position, and be bruised in a new place." Nearly 250 years after uttering that line, it seems Irving could well have been talking about the way middle school-age kids hurdle one challenge after another.

Probably the most valuable thing they are learning is that life isn't all about them anymore. They feel pressured because they suddenly have personal goals they want to accomplish, yet there are employers, friends, teachers, siblings and parents who are depending on them. Worse still, the days of other people taking care of their obligations are diminishing proportionately. In order to meet the increasing demands on their time, middle-schoolers fling themselves through a day of school, organized sports or clubs, part-time jobs, homework, hobbies, mealtimes, activities with friends, and family and more.

"There isn't enough time to get everything in," says Alexis, a 7th grader. "The amount of homework I have increases every year, and at the same time I'm on the school basketball and swim teams. I feel like I need more time to relax with my friends." Eighth grader Brandon agrees: "I like to hang at the mall, go to movies, and play video games, but I usually only have time for that on Saturday or Sunday afternoon."

What other challenges do these 12-, 13-, and 14-year-olds face each day as they navigate from one activity to another? Not surprisingly, they can talk at great length on the omnipresent external influences, both positive and negative, that seem to be around every corner. A bit harder for them is expressing how the individual physical and emotional changes that come with adolescence affect their daily lives.

The culture of school

Every middle school's population is sub-divided into cliques or clans that seem to best fit a particular personality. "There's jocks, Goths, the 'popular' group, nerds, stoners and some other smaller groups," says Dominic, an 8th grader. "I mean, I hate to label people like that, because it really isn't fair, but you're pretty much identified by the group you hang with." Dominic and his friend Alex say they are not part of any one group. Instead, they like aspects of several groups and are comfortable interacting with a number of them. "I'm not 'popular,' because I'm not into clothes and fashion and image," says Alex. "But I like a lot of the people in that group and I'll hang out with them as much as I'll hang out with people who like sports [jocks] or the ones who are the best students [nerds]."

There's much more pressure and anxiety among girls regarding cliques. Sara, a 7th grader, said the popular group pretty much sets the tone for her school. "They have their own table in the cafeteria. It's like their clubhouse where they sit and make fun of the people they don't like," Sara says. "Their whole thing is about what clothes they wear, and how much attention they can get."

Sara also says there are always people hanging around trying to break into the inner circle.

"Even if they're treated badly or insulted, they keep trying to get in," she says. "I don't really want to judge them though. I think deep down they're just like the rest of us, trying to make it through school the best way they know how."

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> — *Dominic, 8th grade*

Michael F. McBride, M.D., a child and adolescent psychiatrist with offices in Wauwatosa and Franklin, says that people finding each other and bonding is a natural phenomenon that harkens back to a primitive, subconscious need for safety and security.

"Due to the onset of puberty, middle school also tends to be the place where kids are beginning to question their own identities" McBride says. "The natural gravitation toward similar personalities helps to more sharply define a sense of self."

Amy Harrington, a counselor at Longfellow Middle School in Wauwatosa, says students at this stage of development need to feel like they fit in somewhere.

"For girls, it's even more important for them to be accepted," she says. According to Harrington, girls in the popular group tend to be "alpha" females — girls who are outgoing, socially adept and can interact more comfortably with adults than most of their peers. "These girls are looked up to and they get a lot of attention, especially from the guys," says Harrington. "The group becomes very powerful, and no one on the inside wants to lose that edge."

Dealing with the opposite sex

Along with the onset of adolescence comes a heightened awareness of the opposite sex. Girls may initiate contact at this stage because they tend to be two or three years ahead of boys in terms of social skills and emotional development. However, these early relationships and their lack of reciprocity can be frustrating for girls.

Allison, an 8th grader, says a good friend she's known since kindergarten has suddenly become someone she doesn't recognize anymore. "She's totally boy-crazy now," Allison says. "Every time we're together, all she can talk about is this guy or that guy, and how cute they are. She writes their names all over her notebooks and inside her locker." Allison says the worst trend of all is the way her friend flies into a jealous rage if any other girl talks to her current infatuation. "Even if you just said 'Hi' or something, she runs up and demands to know what you said and tells you he's 'off limits.' I really hate that," Allison says.

McBride says people at this age are driven by emerging biological instincts, and because girls are more emotionally mature, they are subconsciously preparing to attract a mate. "The guys, on the other hand, truly have no clue as to what's happening below the radar," says McBride. "Often, at this age, the guys like girls as friends and are happy just hanging out with them."

George, a 7th grader agrees. "I had a sort of a girlfriend, but it was too stressful," he says. "Girls are cool, but the one-on-one thing is just way too intense." George says he'd much rather go out as a group of friends.

Harrington says boys and girls at this age usually have different ideas of what 'going out' means. "At first, the guys find the attention flattering," she says. "But they really don't know how to handle the outpouring of emotions that girls bring to the relationship."

"The good news is that this kind of thing usually sorts itself out by high school," McBride says. "The social skills, the ability to articulate thoughts and feelings, and emotional development have gotten to a point where the playing field is more level."

Relationships with the folks

Michael, an 8th grader, says his parents are involved in his school activities as well as his social life. There are clear expectations from them regarding timely completion of homework or other school assignments. He also has curfews that range from 8:30 or 9 p.m. on a school night to 11 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays. "I don't always like it, but I know they care," Michael says. "I see some people who don't do their homework and are just kind of drifting, and I'm thinking maybe they don't have anyone who is really concerned about them."

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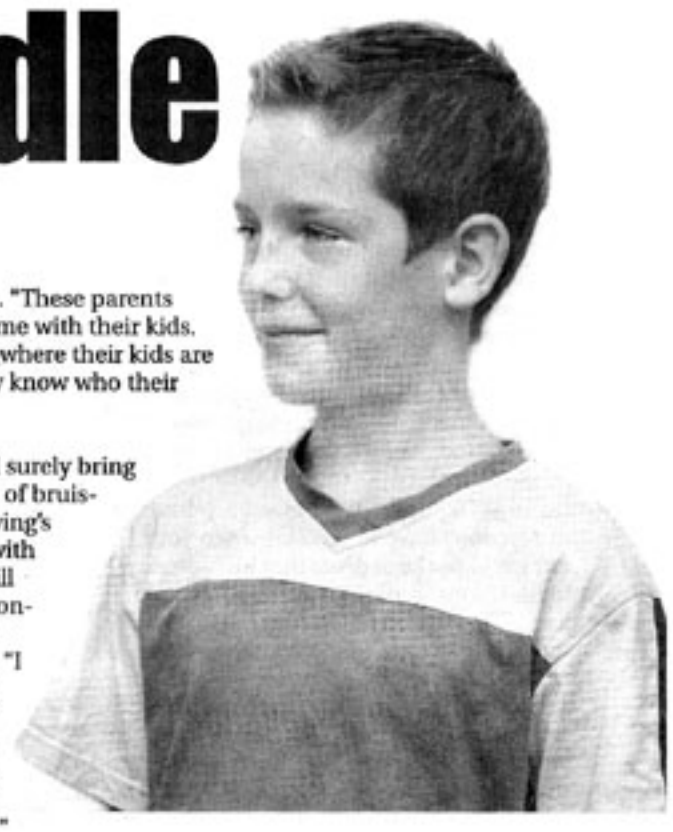
"Kids really need to feel that someone is watching over them," Dr. McBride says. "Part of a teenager's job at this point is to test the limits imposed on them."

Parents who always say "yes" are not doing their kids any favors. "A teenager without limitations is like a car without brakes," he says.

Harrington says parental involvement is critical to a child's development. "I see very clearly that kids who are successful in middle school are the ones whose parents are providing structure and consistency at home," she says. "These parents spend quality time with their kids. They also know where their kids are at all times, they know who their friends are."

High school will surely bring a whole new set of bruises, to borrow Irving's metaphor, but with those bruises will come the burgeoning inner confidence that says, "I took everything middle school had to throw at me and I made it. I can handle whatever's next."



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