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Introduction

'As I grow, push but do not shove, talk but do not scream, teach but do not lecture, hold me but let me go when I want to go, guide me but don't live my life for me, and—most important of all—always love me!'

The fourteen-year-old quoted above is giving quite a difficult order to fulfill! This quote comes from a student publication. When I initially read it, I wondered if it was written for a parent or for a teacher. There is no indication. As I have studied it further, I have come to the conclusion that it really doesn't matter, for it speaks volumes about the way young adolescents want to interact with the adults in their lives.

The roles of parenting and teaching often overlap, and it's very hard to separate the two. This is especially true during the middle years of schooling when both roles are particularly challenging. At younger ages, we might worry about small problems, such as completing an assignment or a household chore. However, the overwhelming physical, emotional and social issues faced by students aged ten to fifteen seem to dwarf smaller problems such as completing homework or keeping one's room clean!

I have been the parent of two middle-school boys (luckily they don't stay that age forever) and have worked as a teacher and counsellor with thousands of kids aged ten to fifteen. After thirty years I still enjoy working with this age group on a regular basis! Some of what I have learnt over these thirty years forms the core of this book.

Every middle-schooler is different from the next. They are all both lovable and frustrating in their own way, but just like flowers in a garden, not every one of them blooms at the same time, grows at the same rate or requires the same amount of nurturing. It takes patience and understanding to recognise that each child, though the same chronological age, is a unique individual.

Nevertheless, there are some traits that most ten to fifteen-year-olds seem to have in common. All of the traits on my list appear to be paradoxical, and perhaps in the end this is the common thread of this age group!

Think about the middle schoolers in your life. Which of these traits have you noticed? What other traits would you add?

1. Seem to alternate between bursts of great energy and long periods of 'vegging out' and doing very little.
2. Are risk-takers and daredevils one minute and have hurt feelings or unexplainable fears the next.
3. Want more independence and tell parents to 'get out of my life' while at the same time crave love and understanding.
4. Tell parents how weird they are but may brag to their friends about how 'cool' their parents are.
5. Focus intensely on their own individuality, including their interests, thoughts and desires, yet are unduly concerned about what others think about them, especially other kids their age.
6. Want privileges and independence, but shun the responsibility that should accompany these.
7. Are aware of injustices and social issues in a global sense, yet may treat the kid standing next to them in the cruellest possible way.
8. Hope to be treated like a grown-up, yet won't go to bed without a favourite childhood toy.
9. Try to hide emotions under a facade of bravado but cry or explode over some little thing.
10. Say they are individual thinkers, but won't wear something that isn't what everyone else is wearing or participate in an activity that isn't the 'in thing' to do.

As you can see from this list, the development of adolescents from ages ten to fifteen is complex. In order to examine and understand what happens during these ages, we can divide this process into several categories. This is what I have done in writing this book. It is divided into seven main parts:

- **Social and Emotional Development**
- **Physical Changes and Concerns**
- **The Importance of Friends**
- **The Home/School Connection**
- **The School Environment**
- **Intellectual Development**
- **Becoming an Independent Person**

None of these areas stands alone; all are very much interrelated. In order to work with and/or live with these young people, it is helpful to know what to expect and to know what is 'normal' in each area of consideration. Keep in mind that variability is the norm for these kids, and that there is definitely no magic formula for dealing with them!

I hope this book will add to your understanding of those very special middle-schoolers in your life.

Chapter 1.

An Overview Of The Middle Years

“School is boring,” announced twelve year old Brian.

“Yeah,” agreed Teresa, “I usually think of some reason to get out of class. The work is just too stupid. I hate answering all of those questions from the science book.”

“My teacher says all I do is daydream,” chimed in Gemma. “But if I think about what I can do at the mall when I get out of school, the time goes faster.”

“I sleep in class,” declared Chris as he sat slouched in his chair with his arms folded and with a smirk on his face. “I just tell Mrs. Moore that I won't do the work, and I don't!”

These four middle year students sat in my office discussing some of their problems in school. Their teachers had described their actions in the following ways:

- Refuses to do assignments**
- Sleeps in class**
- Is openly defiant**
- Displays negative body language**
- Has poor attendance**
- Needs to leave class often**
- Daydreams**
- Has excuses for incomplete work**

For students like those described above and thousands of others like them, the middle years are crucial! Students in the middle years are navigating the stormy years of transition from childhood to adulthood. What happens academically and personally during these years will point the way to what their lives as adults will be like. Teachers and parents find them frustrating, exas-