



The Family Connection

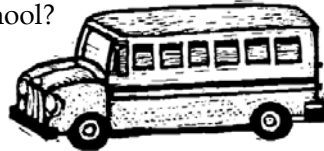
News to Use for families of young adolescents

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What Counts in Your Middle School?

What is important in your school? Not what people say is important, but what are the values that are recognized, supported, and modeled?



What counts and what doesn't tells us a great deal about a school and the values and expectations it has for its students, teachers, and community. Sometimes these values are subtle, not clearly visible; but students are very astute in recognizing the values that adults and the community around them see as essential.

Things That Count—And Shouldn't

- **Hats and gum** become symbols of order, telling students that they are not in charge and have little say in their school. Of course, there may be good reasons not to wear hats or chew gum in schools, but rarely do students participate in discussions of why hats (or certain clothing styles) and gum have been outlawed. If hats and gum are a major focus, that often means essential issues—establishing relationships or studying interesting topics—are ignored.
- **Student compliance**—being seen and not heard—inhibits student learning. A quiet school is not necessarily a good school, yet many schools still operate on the principle that teacher talk is good and student talk is bad. In this situation, students equate silence with compliance. And soon, school is not taken seriously because their voices are not valued.
- **Knowledge in a vacuum.** The traditional classroom, which spreads around facts here and there, offers few opportunities for students to make connections across disciplines and does not promote active or in-depth learning. Young adolescents need frequent opportunities to study topics that have relevance and interest to them. Schools should promote the study of concepts that encourage students to learn across disciplines.

Things That DO NOT Count—And Should

- **Giving back.** How can we counteract the natural tendency for young adolescents to be most concerned with their own needs, if we don't model ways for them to think about others. Schools must offer opportunities for students to make a difference in the lives of others through service learning projects in the school and community.
- **Character and moral courage.** Young adolescents must learn to stand up for what they believe—a fundamental concept in a democracy. Contentious and controversial issues cannot be buried or kept in the background; rather, they need to be brought into the open for discussion and study as a significant part of the curriculum. Students need to read about people who showed uncommon courage in the face of difficult circumstances.
- Students need more opportunities for **learning in context** where their interests and needs are considered; hands-on/minds-on learning showing students how to make connections between big ideas and concepts. Too many students spend far too much time responding to teachers' directions, lectures, and analyses, with few chances to develop their own thinking.

Parents Ask

Q: *Why won't my son talk to me about important things or even day-to-day activities? Lately, he has just clammed up and rarely speaks to me unless spoken to directly.*

A: For some young adolescents, the *moment* is everything. While the Cleavers made dinner table conversation look easy, that is not always the best place to "grill" your son about his day. The moment he walks into the house after school may not work, either. Instead, do something relaxing with your son, and let the conversation begin naturally. Take a walk, ride your bikes around the block, play catch, or throw the Frisbee; do something active together. Talk about your own day or something in the news or a bit of family history—anything to get the conversation started. But, try to keep the questions to a minimum and let your son initiate the conversation about his day, his work, and his life. It is critical to keep coming back. Don't expect the "big talk" every day, but do stay connected, and the communication will take care of itself.

Tips For Parents

Sometimes, it is hard to find ways to engage young adolescents in giving back. If you can't find a ready-made opportunity in your community or school, spend a few minutes (we guarantee it will turn into at least an hour) on the following Web site www.dosomething.org

Their mission...

"We believe young people have the power to make a difference. It is our aim to inspire, support and celebrate a generation of do-ers: people who see the need to do something, believe in their ability to get it done, and then take action."

"Our Web site is a community where young people learn, listen, speak, vote, volunteer, ask, and take action to make the world a better place. Currently, only 23% of this

generation actively volunteers. Our hope is to create a do something generation, a world where more than 51% of young people are involved with community action."

This organization was started in 1993 by Andrew Shue (Billy on Melrose Place) as a challenge from his parents to "do something" and now has more than 100,000 members. Do something today to challenge your young adolescent to give back!

Staying The Course

Parenting is a rewarding, but sometimes exhausting job, so it is understandable when parents feel worn down and too tired to stay the adult course. In some instances, parents may feel it is all right to weaken, but in the long run, children benefit from a voice and position of strength.

- It is important to remember to be the strong but caring parent when that sweet, loving child of 9 turns into an independent, "I have my own idea of what's right" young adolescent of 10 or 11. It seems that just last week chaperoning a school trip was an act of pure love by a parent. Now the demands to "drop me off a block away" and the pleading not to chaperone the field trip or the dance come regularly and forcefully. Remember that, while it is important for young adolescents to become independent, it is equally important for them to learn to be themselves and enjoy their friends in the presence of caring adults.

Young adolescents need to become individuals, but they also need to learn that they do not control their parents' attendance at school functions. To be fair, be sensitive to their need for separation from their parents; but giving them that much control is more autonomy that they can handle. So, next time, compromise by saying, "I know you want your space, and I promise not to be right beside you the whole time, but your school needs my assistance, and I plan to be there for part of the time. Besides, I enjoy seeing you having such a good time with your friends."

- It is important to remember to be the strong but caring parent when the child who always wore appropriate clothing now dresses for school looking as if she just turned 21 and is ready to go out clubbing. When she is not allowed to leave the house until more of her body is covered, she responds with a string of words that include "old-fashioned" and

"out of touch." Teaching her the message she sends about herself by what she wears is difficult but very worthwhile, as your daughter learns to respect her body and develop a strong sense of self-worth.

- And finally, remember that "My Space" is also *your* space and everyone else's, for that matter. Check to see if your young adolescents have "My Space" pages and what they say. Talk with them about what information is appropriate to put out to the world. Many young adolescents are not able to think abstractly enough to recognize the broad exposure that "My Space" gives them. It is critical for parents to help them understand that this is not the place to try out a funky identity that could have serious consequences for them. If they have a "My Space" page, make sure that they present only information that is parent approved.



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