

Tips for Surviving the Middle School Years

By Kevin T. Kalikow, MD

Quickly, answer the following two questions:

What period of your life would you most like to relive?

What period of your life would you least like to relive?

My guess is that most of you chose to repeat college. What could be better? You're on your own. Nobody knows when you go to class, if you go to class, what you eat, whether you eat, if you sleep all day or if you fly to Louisville for the Kentucky Derby. You're no longer freaked out by those little patches of hair scattered all over your body. Without your parents watching your every move, you can enjoy your hormones, instead of breaking out in a cold sweat whenever that special someone approaches. You feel smart, independent and confident.

But I'll bet you dollars to donuts most of you would avoid early adolescence-like the plague. For one thing, it's hard to know exactly when this stage is. Some of us start at 10 years old and others at 15; but all of us can feel the incipient change. Everybody nervously awaits that first hair to sprout like a nervous new farmer awaits his first crop. Nobody wants to be first, but nobody wants to be last. Your arms and legs are getting longer than you know what to do with. You feel as graceful as a young giraffe.

You learn about the dizzying power of hormones. Boys suddenly realize a certain surge when next to the girl with whom they used to play kickball. Girls develop crushes on boys who are more their own size-but sometimes that means they're two years older.

You want to be independent, make your own decisions. But, in your heart of hearts, you're scared to do anything, except what everyone else is doing. If everyone else takes an L.L. Bean book bag to school, so do you. But you want to be unique, make a statement, so you hang your favorite New York Giants keychain on the zipper.

You're sure your parents have no idea that you're capable of thinking for yourself because they still tell you what to do and when to do it. Just when you're lost in a romantic reverie or getting one of the sexual surges, they pop their head in your door to remind you to do your homework. How about some privacy, pleeeeeease?

No, most of us would not care to repeat early adolescence.

On the other hand, if I waited 30 years and asked you the same questions, perhaps you'd recall being the parent of an early adolescent as your most difficult stage of life.

Dealing with the emotional roller coaster is not easy. You never know who's coming downstairs-Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde. One mother recently reported the following dinnertime dialogue:

Mother to 12 year old: Please pass the butter, dear.

Twelve year old to Mother: I'm not your SLAVE! Stop bossing me around!

Mother stopped, scratched her head and wondered if she was living on the same planet as her son.

Parents of the early adolescent must negotiate an emotional minefield caused by the child's feeling of insecurity and the intense need to do whatever it takes to fit in. One mother asked her son if he'd like a waffle. "You know I'm trying to lose weight," he rifled back. The concern about fitting in physically can be overwhelming for kids, but the task of seeing to it that our children are physically safe and healthy is equally daunting.

As the parent of an early adolescent, you don't know if you should offer advice or watch in quiet horror as your child makes obviously dumb decisions that are certain to blow up in his or her freshly pimpled face. And heaven forbid you should be seen with your child in the wrong place by the wrong people, either looking like the dork he or she knows you are or looking too much like the adolescent he or she knows you are no longer.

This stuff can make you nuts. So here are some tips to make this stage a bit more pleasant.

1. **Be there.** Beneath the awkwardness and the obnoxious, macho veneer is a sensitive, vulnerable child struggling to understand a new body and develop a sense of independence. Your young adolescent needs your advice and your vote of confidence.
2. **Give advice in a non-judgmental tone.** When you're feeling insecure, do you like to hear advice in a sarcastic, "you'll be sorry" tone of voice? Neither does your child.
3. **Keep advice brief.** Don't belabor the point. And watch your timing. Give advice privately and not when your child is distraught.
4. **Show some vulnerability yourself.** Nobody likes to feel like the only one with a problem. A brief tale of how you felt during one of your adolescent crises will be appreciated, if you don't try too vigorously to disprove your adolescent's assertion that, "You just don't understand."
5. **Allow your child to make mistakes.** You cannot protect your child from every hurt. Sometimes a painful experience is a wonderful teaching experience.
6. **Encourage independence.** Surprise your child with an unexpected responsibility you know he or she can handle. Let your child make his or her own final decision when possible.
7. **Encourage social interactions, but beware** of forcing them, especially on shy kids who overwhelm easily. Sometimes small groups are easier and

activities at which your child does well are obviously more fun. School friends don't easily generalize to after school friends.

8. **Listen respectfully** until your child finishes speaking, even though he or she sounds absurdly naïve. Then, calmly tell your child your thoughts. You might even state your thoughts in a "for your consideration" tone, instead of as the all-knowing autocrat.
9. **Set limits.** Your child may protest, but limits add a feeling of security. Don't hold a grudge. When the inevitable conflict ends, drop it and move on without animosity.
10. **Be a role model** for your child. Contrary to popular opinion, far more adolescents identify with their parents' values than do not.

Remember: your child may have one foot in adolescence, but the other foot is still in the playroom with superheroes and dolls, night-lights and security blankets. Enjoy both sides of your child and with a little luck, you'll make your family's trip through early adolescence more pleasant and productive.