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Meeting the Needs of the Adolescent Learner

by Kathy Checkley

They strive for independence, yet they clamor to belong. They fight the connections they have with their parents, but they need to form alliances with peers and bond with understanding teachers. They are finding themselves and, in the process, will challenge authority, experiment with sarcasm, and try on many different personalities.

They are adolescents. And, if recent brain studies are accurate, they can be as young as age 10 or as old as age 25.

Adolescence is a continuum, and "it's not clear when the brain has finished developing," says education consultant Pat Wolfe, author of the ASCD book *Brain Matters: Translating Research into Classroom Practice*. Such scientific ambiguity suggests a certainty for teachers: those who work with adolescents must understand them, connect with them, and make learning relevant to their lives.

Caught Between Two Worlds

To understand the adolescent is to remember what it's like to be "caught between childhood and adulthood," says Mary Ray Johnson, an 8th grade teacher at Parkview Middle School in Ashwaubenon, Wisc. The growing pains are particularly acute for youth who have entered early adolescence—roughly a five-year span, starting at around age 11. Johnson's 13- to 15-year-old students may feel "grown up" one day but want to be children the next. "It's a tough age—easier to teach than to be," she says.

"This period is the second most rapid period of human maturation," explains Larry Holt, associate professor at the University of Central Florida and one of four facilitators of ASCD's Middle Grades Network. During early adolescence, children develop physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually. Teachers can help students cope with this huge transformation—and keep their own sanity—by striving to understand "the nature of this age group," Holt asserts.

In addition to exhibiting defiance and angst, for example, youth in early adolescence long to be popular. It's a stage of development called the "psychology of belonging," explains Dr. Steven Schlozman, an instructor in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. By later adolescence—by the time a student becomes a junior or senior in high school—that intense need to be a member of



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some group gives way to an acceptance of self. "Healthy children eventually become comfortable with who they are and with their own interests," he says.

Until they reach that comfort zone, however, teachers can play to the social nature of adolescents by giving them ample opportunities to interact with one another.

Janice Daubemier and Debby Kent, once on the same 8th grade team at Hastings Middle School in Upper Arlington, Ohio, recommend structuring lessons so young teens will have time to work in groups. This practice also can help students "deepen and broaden their understanding" of the subject matter, says Kent. When students have to talk about the content with others, when they must explain it, they learn what they know as well as what they need to gain more knowledge of, agrees Daubemier, now a 6th grade teacher at Hastings.

Building Connections

Just as adolescents need to feel included among their peers, they also need to feel supported by the adults in their lives, says Judith Brough, an education professor at Gettysburg College and one of ASCD's Middle Grades Network facilitators. Still, she cautions that while adults may think they are supporting youth, "the kids don't always see it that way."

Brough recalls a survey she conducted among low-achieving students. She asked them to identify the person they would turn to if they didn't understand something. Some mentioned their parents, others said "no one," but none said they would go to their teacher—even though they liked her. They felt she was just "too busy" to care about their achievement.

The teacher in question was crushed when she learned of the students' feelings, and she immediately took measures to reverse the situation. She made it a point to personally talk with each of her students at least every other day, she gave her students her e-mail address, and she created a classroom mailbox so her students could leave notes for her. These concrete strategies helped "show the kids that the teacher was available to them," says Brough.

"Students this age will jump through hoops for you if you show an interest in them and their lives"—both in and outside of school, says Mike Burcin, principal at Martin Meylin Middle School in Lampeter, Pa. Teachers and administrators who work with adolescents must have the ability to relate to them on all levels, he says.

To relate to students, teachers must know them, adds Alfred Arth, professor of education at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln. The middle school philosophy emphasizes advisory programs that support "one teacher knowing 15 students well," says Arth, who is also a facilitator of ASCD's Middle Grades Network. The advisor is not a guidance counselor. Rather, the advisor is someone "who connects with the students and asks, 'How can I help you get through the school day better?'"

Another way to connect with adolescents is to honor how they learn and to nurture their unique talents, says Arth, and the middle school philosophy supports that principle as well. Teams of middle school teachers, each representing different disciplines, discuss each student's abilities and tailor instruction to meet that child's needs. When all team members know that a child is "taking off in reading," for example, they can give him plenty of opportunities to nurture that

ability across the major content areas.

Middle-level educators are also adept at "reading" their students and knowing how to connect with them, adds Holt. This is important, he says, because those connections can help teachers make better instructional choices—choices based on what teachers know about how young minds process information. For example, recent brain research suggests that a teacher's lecture should be about as long as the students' general age, explains Holt. So, a 6th grade teacher, mindful of this guideline, will plan for 11 minutes of whole-group instruction (11 being the average age of 6th graders), followed by a variety of activities that allow the students to process the information through their own learning styles.

Child-Centered, Relevant Instruction

This child-centered approach to teaching is a hallmark of the middle school philosophy. So, too, is an emphasis on making learning relevant to students' lives. This relevance can be achieved when teachers accommodate students' interests, says Brough. When she was a teacher, Brough would ask her students what they were interested in learning. She would then ask her students to compare their interests with the learning objectives they had to meet, and together they would focus the lessons to address both. "If kids have a say in the curriculum, they will be more likely to engage with that curriculum," she says.

Using adolescent literature to boost adolescent literacy and address contemporary issues is an approach Reid Riggle recommends. Riggle is part of a partnership between St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisc., and Parkview Middle School. Students from the college meet with Mary Ray Johnson's 8th grade students to discuss books during literature circles. "Literature provides us with another window into the world of adolescents," Riggle notes.

For example, one book they've studied is *The Misfits* by James Howe. The book addresses identity formation, stereotyping, and the social politics of school—issues that young adolescents face.

The college-middle school partnership benefits both sets of students, observes Johnson: "It gives the college students the experience of working with a small group of kids—and it gives my students the chance to talk about literature with another adult." And, adds Riggle, just as Parkview's teens find it "cool" to debate the finer points of plot with college kids, Parkview's teachers benefit by having opportunities to mentor future teachers and engage "in deep conversations" about instructional issues with other professionals.

When students see how what they study in school is relevant to them, they become excited about learning and bring a passion to the classroom. Adolescents "are passionate about everything—about friendship and about what their beliefs might be," Johnson observes.

So take that energy and use it, urges Wolfe. If you know that adolescents love to argue, for example, have debates in the classroom. "Adolescence is not a time to have students sit and take notes," she says.

Tapping the Community

Daubenmier and Kent agree, and they look to the community to bring meaning to required content. In Ohio, for example, students must spend at least one hour learning about Veterans Day. Daubenmier and Kent decided to turn that requirement into a service-learning project that integrated several content areas, including English and social studies. Students were asked to identify a veteran among their family, friends, or acquaintances, says Kent. They then wrote poems or letters of appreciation to their chosen vet. An appreciation breakfast capped the unit. "This was the service-learning component," Daubenmier explains. Students wrote the invitations and made and served the breakfast.

The Veterans Day project, now a mainstay at Hastings, goes well beyond the "simple little flag ceremony" that had originally been planned, says Kent. "We now spend at least five days addressing the topic." The unit has a special significance when students have relatives or neighbors serving in the military in other countries.

These kinds of projects make learning relevant, says Wolfe. And, as appropriate as these kinds of lessons are for younger adolescents in middle school, they are no less effective for older adolescents. This kind of instruction can be provided throughout high school, Wolfe asserts. "No learning has to be boring."

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