

Shrink Rap - It All Starts in Middle School

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There's a common assumption that most at-risk teen behaviors begin in high school. These behaviors include: substance abuse, sexual activity, safety/self-harm, and delinquent behaviors. For most adolescents, however, these problems actually start in middle school. For example, in a recent survey of Boulder County high school students, 25% reported that they drank alcohol before age 13 (Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2005). That is why it is important for parents to be proactive with their children leading up to and during the middle school years and to begin having discussions about making healthy choices and avoiding at-risk behaviors. For example, research shows that kids whose parents talk with them regularly about drugs and alcohol are 50 percent less likely to use them.

The middle school years are also a time of profound developmental change physically, emotionally, socially, and even neurologically. We once believed that there was one developmental wave of neurological development in children beginning in utero and ending around age three. We now know that there's a second wave of brain development beginning just before puberty (typically around age 11 in girls, 12 in boys) and continuing into the mid-twenties. The parts of the brain that develop at this time are responsible for functions like impulse-control, judgment, decision-making, planning, organization and emotion.

There are academic challenges as well. Data on nearly 100,000 students from the Search Institute suggests "the middle school years are typically a time of lowered interest, motivation, and effort in school" (Scales & Leffert, 1999). After school time can also pose challenges. As children get older they tend to have less supervised time. For example, 23 percent of 10-year-olds spend some time caring for themselves compared to 44 percent of 12-year-olds (Capizzano et al., 2000). This is a concern because studies have documented increased engagement in a variety of at-risk behaviors for youth during the hours immediately after school, especially between 3:00 and 6:00 P.M. including: a spike in the number of youth arrested or who were victims of crime, engagement in sexual activity and substance abuse (Cohen, Farley, Taylor, Martin, & Schuster, 2002; Fox, 1996; Newman, Fox, Flynn, & Christenson, 2000).

The good news is that there are effective strategies that parents can utilize during the middle school years to help address these issues. These include:

- Ongoing conversations with adolescents about making healthy choices and, wherever possible, providing positive feedback
- Utilizing incentives (e.g. privileges) to reinforce desirable behaviors at home, school and in the community
- Involvement in enriching after school activities
- Continuing to provide a structured environment. Teens should be allowed to have more independence, but not enough to place them in jeopardy