

Characteristics of Middle School Students

Early adolescents are in a particularly difficult state of development. As stated in the *Guidelines for Middle School Students in Virginia* (1980), “early adolescents are in a phase of life when it is time to begin to be oneself; a time to imagine and create; a time to seek a self-image; a time to look back and to look forward; a time to wonder; a time to begin a love affair with life; a time to doubt; a time to pause with hesitations; it is also time to approach life’s realities, filled with happiness as well as uncertainty. It is a time in fact when young people are no longer children and not yet adults” (p.4.).

Middle school students are experiencing dramatic changes in physical development, although the rate at which this development occurs varies individually. Changes in height and weight and in body chemistry are taking place along with rapid sexual development. This heightened physical growth, together with their tendency to be very active, causes frequent fatigue in early adolescents. Many of them find it difficult to cope with the many changes taking place in them and compare themselves unfavorably to their peers. At the same time, they are often concerned about their ability to learn and whether or not they can meet the expectations of parents and other adults.

Students of this age are sensitive and have a strong need for approval from others; thus, deflating comments or criticism sometimes have debilitating effects. Conversely, they are frequently thoughtless and calloused in their relationships with one another. They seek associations, relationships, and links with people, things and new ideas. They are particularly concerned about peer approval and acceptance, and they need close friends their own age that can provide the comfort and understanding they find hard to get from adults.

Most early adolescents enjoy team sports; thrive on competition, work hard perfecting athletic skills, and respect good sportsmanship. They seek values in simplified, concrete forms; are often hyper-idealistic; and demand fair treatments. They are usually excitable, easily motivated, creative, inquisitive, and eager to explore; but, if not active participants in learning situations, they may easily drift into daydreams. Above all, they feel the need to establish a realistic self-image and a unique identity apart from parental influence; however, at the same time, they have anxieties related to their futures.