



Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional problems.

TRENDS

MIDDLE SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH RISK

Middle school aged children, aged 10-14, is a high-risk stage for psychopathology development. For instance, 14 years of age represents a time of peak onset of any mental disorder, with 35% of mental disorders diagnosed by this age. Risk-taking behavior, social anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder peaks in onset in middle school children. This increase is in part related to the developmental 'tasks' of this stage.

Increased social sensitivity.

Peer relationships become increasingly important in middle school, with peer feedback weighted heavily in evaluating school experiences. For this reason, social exclusion and bullying are especially harmful for mental health at this age and are related to the increased onset of social anxiety disorder. However, we can also take advantage of this natural orientation to peers through small group counselling in schools and peer mentorship models in which role-model-worthy older students take on a 'buddy' role for younger students.

Identity development

Developing a coherent identity is a key developmental task of middle school aged children, with peers having a central role in identity development. At this stage, children begin to differentiate themselves outside of their roles in their family, increase awareness of how they fit into their social landscape, present themselves differently in distinct social settings, and show greater sensitivity to feedback from peers. This is an essential stage for developing a stable sense of identity and experience of oneself as unique, with clear boundaries between self and others. Coherent identity formation is protective against the development of personality disorders later in life, which are often characterized by individuals feeling unsure of their identity.

School providers can help to support coherent identity formation by helping middle schoolers:

- Imagine different roles for their future selves
- Look for role models in family, schools, and community
- Have open conversations about values and identities
 - A writing exercise to identify values: *Imagine you are at your 80th birthday party and you have all your friends and family around you. Someone you love very much is about to make a speech about you. What kind of things would you like them to say about the kind of person you are (regardless of if you think they are true right now)?*
- Discuss with them how you made decisions about the kind of person you wanted to be
- Do your best to support identity commitments that have been made.

Developmentally sensitive school-based interventions for middle schoolers

There is evidence that traditional school-based efforts to change behaviors (e.g. providing education about risks) are less effective in middle schoolers compared to younger children. Because middle schoolers are more sensitive to their social group, they also start to become more sensitive to their social status and whether they are

offered the respect they feel they deserve. Thus, it may be less helpful to simply provide a what-to-do/what-not-to-do education when we are trying to guide behavior of middle schoolers. Instead, we might be more successful by increasing the social status appeal of different interventions. For example, if we are trying to improve healthy eating, a traditional approach may involve providing information about the risks of healthy eating. However, a more successful and social status targeted approach might emphasize the independent mindedness of healthy eating or identify high-status role models who engage in healthy eating (e.g. favored celebrities or influencers). We can also increase the respectfulness with interventions that do not tell the middle schooler what to do, but instead honor the expectation that they do not be treated as childlike. One example includes self-persuasion exercises in which students write arguments for why someone else may want to believe a persuasive message. These interventions respect the child's competence by recognizing that they have valuable wisdom to share with a peer that we as adults may lack.

Overall, middle school is a time of tremendous developmental change. It is also a time when the brain is very 'plastic' – like a ball of wet clay, vulnerable to being imprinted by both positive and negative influences, making it the ideal time to intervene in mental health and prosocial behavior.



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