How Schools Can Support Parents

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by Margaret Sagarese and Charlene C. Giannetti

With one foot in childhood and the other in adolescence, children between the ages of ten and fourteen confuse and confound their mothers, fathers, stepparents and grandparents. Just when they are in dire need of assistance, parents of students aged 10 and older find far less enthusiasm and far more warnings of troubling times to come.

Not so earlier in the child’s life cycle. During pregnancy, soon-to-be parents are deluged with what they need to know about newborns. Pediatrician visits track babies and answer parents’ questions. The sandbox, the playground, pre-school, day care—the support systems are everywhere.

Yet when a child enters the second decade of life, little information is accessible. As parents try to herd their risk-taking, hormone-driven children through our sexually-charged, danger-ridden world, they need all the help they can get. Young adolescents don't want their parents around at playgrounds or parties, so parents need a retooling of both their insights and parenting skills.

What are the Issues?
The main agenda in every family with children on the cusp of adolescence is control. Grades, when and where to do homework, and studying for tests are three areas that can become tug-of-war control issues. Kids will deliberately dig in their heels and refuse to study or complete assignments when parents continually browbeat.

Even well-meaning parents fall prey to sabotaging their kids with too much pressure and too many expectations. In Parenting 911: How to Safeguard and Rescue Your 10-15-Year-Old, we polled children and asked what could be done to help them do better academically. Fifty percent replied, “Finding ways to reduce stress.” Reading in between the lines, that translates into “Get my parents off my back!”

The controversial issue of privacy also hovers nearby. Adolescents rebel and retreat when parents invade. What children consider a right, parents read as a threat. These conflicting views of the nature of privacy make it hard for a parent to know how a student is doing and where he or she is falling behind. Many parents mistake no news or messages from the teacher as good news.

Can Schools Make Things Better?
The fundamental question school officials grapple with is should schools get involved with parenting tips and techniques for middle-level parents? Does offering parenting strategies fall under the jurisdiction of teachers, administrators, and school counselors?

The answer to the first question is — Absolutely! Teachers told us that parents need to become more involved. Parents insisted that they want to be more involved in how their children are doing in middle school. Every study done on adolescents confirms that they want and need their parents’ attention and approval. Since schools are already in partnership with parents, they are natural guides and can help parents understand and empower the middle-level student.

How to help parents? Here are some suggestions:

Host programs that teach parents about young adolescents. Parents get a distorted image of adolescents from the media. Ordinary boys and girls and the extraordinary life changes they are experiencing play out beneath the media radar. By explaining how hormones cause irritability or how mouthiness stems from frustration, schools can help parents adapt and calmly set standards rather than resort to dueling screaming matches.
Make school counselors available to parents. Counselors can advise parents on how to empower students to share in decisions about when to do homework and how to study for tests. If parents suspect that a child is struggling with a problem, the counselor can be instrumental as a liaison between a student who values his or her private life and a parent who wants to help.

Deliver information in several formats. Be time-sensitive. Evening programs or breakfast consultations work best for working parents.

Don’t offer bad news forums. Parent turnout will be much better if you advertise an evening to explore adolescents rather than a talk about teens and drugs. You can add the information about the risky behavior once you have the audience there.

Write a newsletter. Newsletters, on-line or snail-mailed, are both excellent ways to deliver facts about adolescents to parents.

Develop a checklist of quick facts about young adolescents. These are great for teachers to hand out at conferences.

Spearhead a book club. The club can be mother-daughter, father-son, or parents only. Titles can cover nonfiction books about young adolescents or novels that cover typical themes and issues. Since middle schools bring together several elementary populations, such a forum gives parents access to one another.

Create a Parent Resource Center in your school library. A few good books can bring insights to lots of parents. Publicize the books in your e-mails or newsletters.

There is so much to learn, so little time, and so few parents who understand. Middle schools should bring parents into the loop so they become aware of the school’s efforts to help their children and subsequently become better partners for the school.

Margaret Sagarese and Charlene C. Giannetti are coauthors of What Are You Doing in There? and other books on parenting tweens. They live in New York, lecture extensively, and can be reached at msagarese@aol.com.