Preserving Middle Childhood for the “T Generation”

For my book, Growing Up Too Fast: The Rimm Report on the Secret World of America’s Middle Schoolers (Rodale 2005), I surveyed more than 5,400 students in grades 3 to 8 in 18 states and met many of them in focus groups comprising 10 to 20 students each. My research documents clearly what students in those grades think, feel, and worry about. Although much of what I found may be familiar to principals, there were also some surprises.

Our middle-grade children are exposed to environments more similar to what their parents’ generation experienced in high school, college, and adulthood. In every focus group meeting, when I asked middle school kids what they thought made the biggest difference between their generation and that of their parents, they uniformly and unanimously named technology. Perhaps this should be called the “T Generation.”

The Theft of Middle Childhood

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parents and educators to deal with this difficult developmental stage before they are ready. My research found that by third grade, 15 percent of children worried that their parents didn’t understand them.

Overempowered Children

I found that middle school children were overempowered. Although many fifth graders believed they already were making two-thirds of their life decisions, they weren’t satisfied. More than half thought their parents weren’t letting them make enough of their own decisions. One fifth-grade boy said: “My parents won’t listen to me. My dad thinks I should be treated differently just because I’m a kid…He says, ‘I’m the adult here, and I should be treated differently because I’m older.’ I don’t agree.”

Alcohol, Drugs, and Sex

Worries about peer pressure to try alcohol, drugs, and sex also start by third grade. While these worries declined with each grade, actual engagement in alcohol, drug use, and promiscuous sex increased. Based on a national study, 37 percent of sampled students in grades 6 to 8 indicated they had used alcohol during the previous year and 15 percent indicated illicit drug use. By age 14, Child Trends Research Group found that 16 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys reported having had sexual intercourse. In the words of a sixth-grade girl: “We knew as much about sex in second grade as our parents knew in middle school. We know everything about sex now because we’ve seen it all on television and the Internet.”

While these children may know far less about sex than they believe, technology has introduced them to a world far beyond their developmental readiness. Children spend more than four times as much time watching screens as they do on homework.

Technology Is Here to Stay

There are several things that parents and educators can do to maintain healthy middle childhood, despite some of technology’s negative effects. Technology can even help them. Principals can lead by communicating to parents and teachers the importance of coping with peer pressures, encouraging healthy interests and involvement, teaching about responsibility, and establishing limits.

Despite the frightening statistics, many children move through the middle grades with good attitudes and learning experiences when parents and educators work together to guide them.

Reference


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