



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

*A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania*

## NAVIGATING THE 'TWEEN YEARS

**Question:** What do you call a child who morphs from a person of contentment, cooperation and open approachability into a person of confusion, awkwardness, hyper-sensitivity and self-consciousness?

**Answer:** A 'Tween-stager.

'Tweeners find themselves in the land of in-betweens and not-yets! They are in-between puberty and young adulthood and between elementary school and high school. They no longer fit in the group called children but they do not yet qualify as adolescents. Because 'tweens function within that transitional time gap, some psychologists refer to them as *transescents*. Whatever you call them, 'tween-stagers are young folks in the age range of 11-12-13 and the schooling age of grades 6, 7, 8. They are caught in the middle and it is an uncomfortable place to be. Their bodies are starting to change (or not, which is *really* painful!) Body chemistry, hormones, and brain development introduce major shifts from what was known and comfortable to the unknown and new ways of perceiving themselves and the world.

The challenges inherent to the middle school years are compounded by the fact that not all 'tweens are equal! By that I mean that at any one age, some children are "seedlings," others are "buds," and still others are "blooms." For instance, some eleven year olds continue comfortably in the ways of blissful tens well into their eleventh year. "Textbook TENS" are pre-pubescent. They are active though calm, cooperative, curious and they like group projects, activities, and single-gender clubs. Membership in clubs/groups tend to have short terms since tens jump quickly to new interests and begin to cultivate distinct abilities. Typical Tens desire to do well in tasks but they lose interest when they meet obstacles. Tens are eager to perform and they tend to be dependable, responsible, and decisive. They are cooperative, service-oriented, and generally happy and friendly. They appreciate adult recognition and advice and they are dependent on adult approval, despite the fact that they are often outspoken and critical of adults.

Other eleven year olds are pubescent. They are experiencing initial changes in body, mind, and spirit that lead to mood swings and self-absorption. Elevens are easily embarrassed and self-conscious. They believe that they need to "save face" in front of their peers. Their age-ten eagerness for public performance shifts to age-eleven reticence. The easy friendliness of the tens gives way to sensitivity and seriousness. These elevens challenge rules, push the limits, and become argumentative. Power groups start to form and both genders fret over feeling "in" or "out" of the popular group. Cliques begin to form and hearts begin to hurt! Keep the developmental continuum in mind as you read this article. It explains "textbook 'tweens."

### TEXTBOOK 'TWEENS – A PROFILE

Typically a middle school student is loud. Why whisper when you can shout? Outbursts and behavior geared to provoke a response seem par for the course! 'Tween behavior is often hypocritical. You may have noticed that 'tweens have one standard for themselves but a different and higher standard for others, particularly for their parents and teachers. They resent criticism and insults even though they may express the same things themselves. Short term thinking probably takes precedence over long term planning. Risk-taking behaviors arise out of the lack of cause-and-effect thinking and from feelings of omnipotence and invulnerability.

Middle school pupils live in the world of an imaginary audience. They perceive that “everyone” is looking at them and thinking about them and judging them. They act and react with this audience in mind. That, in itself, is a very good reason for speaking one-on-one in private whenever the topic is sensitive or directional or confrontational. Some ‘tweens give off an air or superiority to mask their feelings of insecurity. Others demonstrate inferior feelings, so sure that the peers in their audience are more capable than they. They are afraid of making a mistake, particularly a public one, and so they’d rather not try. Or, because they expect that they will perform inferiorly, they make excuses like, “I forgot to hand in the assignment” or “I did not know that the project was due today.” ‘Tweens are self-conscious and therefore, they want to avoid center stage if they perceive that they will be found inadequate.

Daydreaming is quite common. The world of possibility is far more enticing to a ‘tween than the world of reality. Furthermore, ‘tweens become easily bored. Middle school students like to explore with hands-on activity. They prefer activity-related, multi-layered learning to lectures, reading, or linear learning. They have a natural curiosity. Novelty and unconventional approaches grab their attention and interest, thereby becoming motivational.

Pamela Jo Bondi<sup>1</sup> captured the essence of ‘tweens in a poem titled, “What is a Middle Schooler?” Does your experience resonate with her perception?

“What is a middle schooler? I was asked one day.  
I knew what he was, but what should I say?

He is noise and confusion. He is silence that is deep.  
He is sunshine and laughter, on a cloud that will weep.

He is swift as an arrow. He is waster of time.  
He wants to be rich, but cannot save a dime.

He is rude and nasty. He is polite as can be.  
He wants parental guidance, but fights to be free.

He is aggressive and bossy. He is timid and shy.  
He knows all the answers, but still will ask, “why.”

He is awkward and clumsy. He is graceful and poised.  
He is ever changing, but do not be annoyed.

What is a middle schooler? I was asked one day.  
He is the future unfolding, so don’t stand in his way.” (p. 49)

Educator Donna Marie San Antonio<sup>2</sup> captured the see-saw essence of early adolescence in this way:

“Here is the wonderfully complex early adolescent. Fiercely independent, yet yearning for meaningful relationships with adults; revealing emotional vulnerability, yet deeply self-protective; capable of complex analytic thinking, yet disorganized to the point of chronic forgetfulness; compassionate and altruistic in the desire to make the world a better place, and yet capable of striking out cruelly at an unpopular classmate; able to understand and accommodate the needs of others, yet displaying a self-centeredness that seems regressive compared with the kindhearted 8-year-old we knew a few years ago. The early adolescent worries us and astonishes us at the same time.” (p. 9)

Profiling is a dangerous activity! As illustrated above, there is no such thing as “one size fits all.” There will always be people to the left and to the right of “average.” No two ‘tweens, even from the same family, are identical. Parents know it and teachers know it. Within a single class of same grade level students, some lack readiness skills (emotionally, socially, or cognitively), others have ready-ability to process the targeted curriculum or activity, and some seem like light-years ahead of the norm. Age/Stage-appropriate profiles as well as stage theories of development attempt to identify normal trends. Always keep in mind that stage information is more

fluid than rigid, and age correlations are merely guidelines, not gods! With this perspective in mind, I offer you a profile of “textbook ’tween-stagers.

### **SIXTH GRADERS (ELEVEN YEAR OLDS)**

Eleven year olds, usually sixth graders, experience rapid and uneven physical growth that translates into awkwardness, restlessness, laziness and impatience. Their emotional responses are closely related to their physical and emotional growth. For instance, girls easily cry and boys swear and fight. Elevens are sometimes touchy and irritable. Teasing and antagonism between the genders is typical. **Elevens** object to being treated like children and they interpret suggestions as criticism which they resent. Sixth graders enter into a time of fear, worry, doubt and insecurity about themselves and about others. Friendships become more complex and intense and elevens begin to value the opinions of peers more than those of parents and teachers. Because 11 year olds like to think about their future, they enjoy daydreaming. They also begin to think about their sex role and their attractiveness. They become concerned about their physical appearance. Their attention span grows longer and more concentrated. The average sixth grader develops an attention span of 30-45 minutes. (Research suggests that a normal attention span capability is three to five minutes per year of a child’s age.) Sixth graders desire unity and conformity and so, differences of opinions among their friends and family disturb them. They are concerned about right and wrong, fairness, cheating, and lying. They willingly participate in discussions and they entertain searching questions about God, life and death.

### **SEVENTH GRADERS (TWELVE YEAR OLDS)**

“Who am I?” becomes the compelling life question of twelve year olds. They seek the answer through connection with peers, being highly motivated by a sense of belonging and acceptance by the peer group. Capable of self-awareness, empathy and insight they are more introspective than in earlier years. If they are not active participants in their learning situations, they drift easily into daydreams. Fantasy thinking of their early years gives way to futuristic planning. **Twelves** enjoy both group and individual work. They are capable of taking on major responsibilities such as fund raising, managing a newspaper route, organizing an activity, or providing childcare. And yet, they are careless with household chores, maintaining a clean bedroom, and keeping track of school assignments. Seventh graders become more

civic-minded, showing interest in history and current events. Their thinking becomes sophisticated enough to understand and enjoy sarcasm and double entendre (double meanings). Most boys are on the threshold of showing signs of puberty while many girls are already menstruating.

### **EIGHTH GRADERS (THIRTEEN YEAR OLDS)**

The greatest variability in physiological development and size occurs at this age and happens much faster in girls than in boys. The California Department of Education<sup>3</sup> cited age thirteen as a period of contrasts, confusion, and erratic, inconsistent behavior: (1) Anxiety and fear contrast with periods of bravado. (2) Feelings shift between superiority and inferiority. (3) And the chemical/hormonal imbalances present within the thirteen year old cause havoc. **Thirteens** may regress to more childish behavior patterns. They are easily offended and are hyper-sensitive to criticism of personal shortcomings. They tend to exaggerate simple occurrences and believe that personal problems, experiences, and feelings are unique to themselves. They are moody and restless. They often feel self-conscious and alienated. They lack self-esteem, and are introspective as well as vulnerable to naïve opinions, and one-sided arguments.

Characteristically, eighth graders are fiercely loyal to peer group values and sometimes cruel or insensitive to those outside the peer group. They want to establish positive social relationships with members of the same and opposite gender though they prefer working alone or with a single partner. Girls focus on close friendships while boys tend to travel in small groups. Both can be mean, stemming from being insecure or scared. They speak in monosyllables to parents, like yes/no/grunt, or “whatever!” or they may use loud, extreme language. They appreciate warm affection and a sense of humor in adults but become shut down by nagging and condemnation. Author Chip Wood<sup>4</sup>, explained that eighth graders want privacy at home, expend hours on peer communication (phone, e-mail, texting, twittering, facebook) and with computer, video games and TV, use their bedroom decor to advertise their personality and independence, and they feel tremendous peer pressure in how to dress, how to talk, and what entertainment to value.

## **THRIVE RATHER THAN MERELY SURVIVE**

During the middle school years adopt an attitude of THRIVE versus SURVIVE. The preceding profiles explained tendencies and urges and traits that are prompted by biologic changes, but that does not mean that hormones need or ought to have the last say! In a word, the terms “explanation” and “excuse” are not synonyms! Profiles, characteristic charts, and popular literature, for instance, explain the naturalness of erratic and stressful behavior during the ‘tween years, but the explanation in no way excuses rudeness or disrespectful interaction or refusal to complete legitimate expectations of adults or irresponsibility or cruel treatment of peers, etc. The middle school years are formative in the future character of the person. Parents remain the primary agents of formation for their children – even during the ‘tween years. Stressful events can be turned into teachable moments.

Parents (and teachers) can hone three sets of skills to assist them in their ‘tween-rearing efforts. First, they can develop adult personality skills that appeal to middle-schoolers. Second, they can learn what it is that middle school age children need in order for them to emerge from the ‘tween years as young adolescents who are prepared to embrace their high school years. Third, they can study how to foster the emotional, cognitive, moral, spiritual and relational development of ‘tween-agers.

**ADULT PERSONALITY SKILLS:** Wiles and Bondi,<sup>6</sup> authors of *The Essential Middle School*, reported characteristics that were common to effective Middle School teachers. Since parents are the primary teachers they, too, will be most effective when they are perceived as being patient, fun-loving, optimistic, compassionate, respectful, open-minded, spontaneous, tolerant, caring, flexible/adaptable, stage-knowledgeable, enthusiastic, cooperative, compatible with diversity, alive intellectually, physically and socially, and possess a variety of skills, abilities, and talents. In addition to these characteristics, ‘tween-effective teachers (and parents) are committed to ‘tween-stagers’ and demonstrate ‘with-it-ness,’ that is, they are aware of and involved in the ‘tween culture and the interests of middle school-aged children. For instance, how knowledgeable are you about the current fads, musical artists/ groups and heroes/heroines of pre-adolescents? How about their movie preferences and video games? How on-top are you of their use of the Internet, e-mail, facebook, twittering, texting, blogging, etc.?

**NEEDS OF ‘TWEENS:** Educational consultant Rick Wormeli<sup>5</sup> reported that the research of the Carnegie Corporation, the findings of National Middle School Association, and the expertise of veteran middle school teachers point to seven conditions that young adolescents crave. Parents

and teachers are well advised to apply the information to goal-setting, decision-making, and formation. Those conditions include: (1) competence and achievement, (2) opportunities for self-definition, (3) creative expression, (4) physical activity, (5) positive social interactions with adults and peers, (6) structure and clear limits, and (7) meaningful participation in family, school, and community. These are substantial goals in the midst of a culture marked by confusion and insecurity. Regardless of body chemistry and the stage-related tendencies to laziness, mood swings, and irresponsibility, or the desire to retreat or withdraw from leadership, the true needs of ‘tweens, what they actually crave, are practices that develop these seven conditions.

**AGE/STAGE DEVELOPMENT:** For parents (and teachers) who engage middle school-aged children, it is essential to understand age-appropriate development. What is “typical” in the development of the social self, the thinking self, the moral self, the spiritual self, the relational self and the sexual self during ages 11, 12, and 13? What does development look like in each of those aspects? How can adults help a ‘tween to grow within and beyond those stages? These questions are the focus of the 2010-2011 Parent Partnership Handbook. Follow the series, *A Parent Guide for Middle School Years*.

## **PARENT PARTNERSHIP HANDBOOK**

The Parent Partnership Handbook feature of *Today’s Catholic Teacher* exists to provide schools with a means to support parents in their vocation to be the primary formative influence in the life of their child. Each issue offers reproducible pages that are suitable for distribution to parents. This year’s handbook, “A Parent Guide for Middle School Years” will elaborate on six areas of human development. Each newsletter will explore a single

aspect of developmental growth and it will suggest stage-appropriate parenting approaches and practical suggestions that nurture maturity during the 'tween years.

### **Issue 1 – The Social 'Tween**

This newsletter focuses on the psychosocial theory of Erik Erikson. It explains that the growing edge for 'twins consists in resolving stage four (industry). Industry is the capacity to be persistent and diligent, to follow-through on a task, to create a systematic approach for problem-solving, and to take pleasure in accomplishing responsibilities.

### **Issue 2 - The Thinking 'Tween**

This newsletter applies the cognitive theory of Jean Piaget. It acknowledges that the middle school years are a transitional time in cognitive growth. 'Twins are moving from stage three (concrete operational thinking) to stage four (formal operational thinking). During stage three children require concrete, black-and-white, manipulative ways in order to process ideas to a logical conclusion. Those who transition to stage four develop the ability to think without the need to see or to manipulate objects. They can think in the abstract.

### **Issue 3 - The Moral 'Tween**

This newsletter reflects the moral development theory of Lawrence Kohlberg. Most middle school-aged children function at stage three (interpersonal conformity) in moral development. 'Twins tend to conform to whatever is the popular behavior. They are oriented to being viewed as "good" and "nice" by people whose approval they consider important. This newsletter discusses ways that adults can create the moral discomfort and conditions necessary to challenge growth into stage four (responsibility to the system).

### **Issue 4 - The Spiritual 'Tween**

## **CONCLUSION**

This article presented "textbook children." It suggested a profile of children during ages 11, 12, and 13. But let's be clear! The life process does not run as smoothly as textbook charts. "Normal" in the family life cycle is textured and complicated by multiple forces, many of which are beyond the control of parents. Add in the thinking, affective, moral, spiritual, relational, and sexual steps toward maturity and a parent could be paralyzed by the responsibility for child-rearing. It is easy for any parent to feel overwhelmed by the challenge of parenting a 'tween-stager.

If you are feeling challenged, take courage! Listen to Jesus who said, "Fear is useless. What is needed is trust" (Mk. 5:35). Trust that "God who began this good work in you will be faithful to complete it." Trust that God's grace will be ever present to sustain you. Trust that you are "enough" for your child. God called you to the vocation of parent. God knew what God was doing.

This newsletter summarizes the faith development theory of James Fowler. 'Twins who function as concrete thinkers continue in stage two (mythic-literal faith) seek belonging. They tend to take stories literally, are rigid in their thinking, strict in their understanding of rules and customs, but they are not yet able to critique an idea on their own authority. As they grow into the ability to think in the abstract, they grow into stage three (synthetic-conventional faith). 'Tween faith becomes *synthetic* because it involves piecing together from a variety of possibilities, a coherent sense of self and commitment. It is *conventional* because community values and attitudes are highly influential in shaping their faith. Faith at this stage is deeply held but it is not very self-reflective, meaning that they are strong about what they believe but that they cannot express why they believe it.

### **Issue 5 - The Relational 'Tween**

Ages 11-13 is the time to develop personality, identify strengths and weaknesses, build conversation skills, recognize desirable qualities in persons of the opposite sex, and learn how to name, claim and tame emotions. This newsletter is written directly to the 'tween. It stresses that adolescence is the time to discover and to develop the "I" – explaining that only a healthy "I" is capable of sustaining a mature "we" relationship.

### **Issue 6 - The Sexual 'Tween**

This newsletter is written directly to the 'tween-stager. It explains how a premature sexual relationship stunts the growth of the "I," grabs one's life energy, and puts a freeze on development. It suggests healthy attitudes, mutual respect, responsibility, and self-control as the standard for social engagement.

To end this article on a humorous note – and humor is good, parents – I place before you “an oldie but goodie.” A download of the song, “Here’s to All You Parents,” is available on iTunes. It is one song on the album *Push On Through*, a 1977 release by the Up With People folks. The song is a favorite of mine. The closing verses proclaim:

“Here’s to all you parents raising kids while the kids are raising cain!  
As the noise is getting louder you go quietly insane.  
Though your nights are often sleepless and your days are never through,  
It’s the most important job that anyone can do.

Here’s to all you parents raising kids while the kids are raising cain!  
There’s no one there to praise you when you’re going through the pain.  
Now kids, you’ve got to try to understand your parents, too.  
And always keep in mind it’s just a phase they’re going through.

1. Wiles, J. and Bondi, J. (1993). *The Essential Middle School*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
2. San Antonio, D.M. (2006). “Broadening the world of early adolescents.” *Educational Leadership*, 63(7), 8-13.
3. California Department of Education. (1989). “Characteristics of middle grade students,” *Caught in the Middle*. Sacramento: California, pp. 144-148.
4. Wood, Chip. (1997). *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4-14*. Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc.
5. Wormeli, R. (2006). “Differentiating for Tweens.” *Educational Leadership*, 63(7), 14-19.
6. Wiles, J. and Bondi, J. (1993). *The Essential Middle School*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

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