Michael Rutter (1987) refers to entry into the middle level school as a trajectory-changing event that represents a convergence of biological, personal, social, familial, and cultural developments. Indeed, the problems that surface in high school often have their roots in middle school (Rutter 1980). Dryfoos (1998) suggests that 35 percent of all 14-year-olds should be considered “very high risk” or “high risk” and another 25 percent considered “moderate risk.” Clearly, there is reason to be concerned about the well-being of our early adolescents.

Many cultures and faiths acknowledge the importance of transitions in adolescence and mark them with rituals, such as Bar or Bat Mitzvahs or confirmations. These sensitive and important transitions—rites of passage—must be handled with emotional intelligence (Mahdi, Christopher, and Meade 1996).

The Middle Level Phenomena

The changes brought on by puberty combine with cognitive and social development changes to make middle school transition a complex situation. Consider the fact that the transition to middle school marks a time of increased referral to mental health services. Rates of smoking, alcohol, drug, and violence problems that appear to peak in the high school really have their start in the middle school (Rutter 1980). Girls suffer particular damage to self-esteem and seem to lose interest and confidence in math and science-related subject areas and careers, often due to social pressures during the middle level school years (Elias, Gara, and Ubriaco 1985; Jackson and Davis 2000; Simmons, Carlton-Ford, and Blyth 1987).

Middle school brings with it opportunities—and demands—to learn to adapt and cope. Educators often underestimate the importance of these demands, but in reality, children's energy for learning depends on the nature of these coping experiences. The problems that students encounter or worry about encountering when they enter middle school challenge adolescents’ coping skills and often are main sources of adolescent stress (see sidebar p. 22). Many trips to the school nurse and phantom ailment-related absences are the result of students’ trying to cope with these kinds of fears or problems and the strong feelings they engender.
The authors of Turning Points 2000 (Jackson and Davis 2000) recommend that middle level schools be staffed by teachers who are experienced in working with adolescents and prepared to create safe and healthy schools in which students are active participants and contributors (Jackson and Davis 2000). These educators should be alert not only to the psychosocial tasks that middle school transition requires students to negotiate but also to the key development needs of adolescents and to the ways in which school and home can support these young people during this challenging time.

Key Developmental Needs
The classic concepts espoused by Erikson and Piaget are important and helpful in understanding the needs of adolescents. However, the relatively new theory of emotional intelligence or social-emotional learning that is rooted in school and home experience and brain behavior relationships also can help explain adolescent behavior.


Challenges Adolescents Face
Virtually every adolescent is looking for answers to the following questions: How can I understand who I am now and who I will be in the future? How can I nurture and build positive relationships? How can I develop skills to handle everyday challenges, problems, decisions, and choices? How can I become a moral, ethical, active, committed human being? How can I develop a positive, constructive identity?

Adolescents rarely verbalize these questions, and sometimes their behavior seems to contradict their search for answers. Nevertheless, educators must understand that teens' behavior revolves around the answers to these identity questions and they will participate in school to the extent to which they perceive their school experiences relate to these questions.

An educator's job is to help students find answers and guide them toward opportunities, relationships, and skills.
that will allow them to develop positive and hopeful visions of themselves. Indeed, the Turning Points 2000 goal of having students learn to “use their minds well” is predicated on their being provided with both the structures and the skills to put their knowledge into constructive, productive, social, ethical action.

A, B, and 3Cs
If we think of adolescence as a journey or a passage between childhood and emerging adulthood, then all along the journey, adolescents are aligning their experiences with their emerging sense of identity against the backdrop of these questions. The road is congested, the routes are not clearly marked, and there are dead ends and detours galore. How do educators guide teens without jumping behind the wheel and taking over, especially at signs of trouble?

The theory of emotional intelligence directs our attention to certain developmental strengths, or assets, that schooling should encourage in students. These are the A, B, and 3Cs: Appreciation, Belonging, Confidence and Competencies, and Contributions.

Appreciation
What are your students’ cherished talents? What are they really good at? Maybe you see these talents in their hobbies. Maybe you don’t see them at all because they emerge only in the privacy of their rooms or only with trusted friends.

Howard Gardner’s (1983) concept of the multiple intelligences refers to the range of talents that children have and suggests that their future identities are strengthened when they have positive outlets to express and develop them. These talents might be in math, science, languages, writing, computers, media, art, music, relationships, sports, dance, outdoor activities, sailing—the list is endless.

The sense of appreciation, of celebration, is an essential part of our teens’ lives. It is something they need to confidently venture out into the world and try out identities. Schools must be places where accomplishments are celebrated and every child has something for which he or she feels appreciated.

Belonging
Teens are looking for places where they have a role or a purpose, where they can find positive peer relationships with others who have similar interests or abilities, and where they can learn things. They want to have inspiring leadership, and feel safe, comfortable, and accepted. Schools should make these opportunities accessible through classes, clubs, teams, after-school groups, and links to community organizations that can instill a sense of belonging.
Competencies and Confidence

We live in an interdependent world; there is no such thing, in any practical sense, as independence and autonomy. We live lives of synergy and linkage. Our children need competencies that allow them to be successful in an interdependent world, to balance smart and heart. They should know how to:
• Recognize and label their feelings and those of others
• Manage their own strong feelings so they can carry out essential responsibilities
• Set goals and plan, both long- and short-term

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY ADOLESCENT COMPETENCIES FOR MIDDLE LEVEL STUDENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Big Picture</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two areas of development are most prominent for middle level students. Students are becoming aware of their sexuality; recognizing and accepting their bodies’ changes and recognizing and resisting inappropriate sexual behaviors are important skills for these students to acquire. Students also must develop skills for analyzing stressful social situations, identifying feelings and goals, and using request and refusal techniques.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Areas for Confidence and Accomplishment</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Becoming self-aware and self-critical</td>
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<td>• Recognizing one’s own conflicting feelings</td>
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<td>• Establishing norms for health</td>
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<td>• Setting realistic short-term goals</td>
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<td>• Seeing both sides of issues, disputes, arguments</td>
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<td>• Comparing one’s abilities to others’ or normative standards; considering others’ reactions to one’s abilities</td>
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<td>• Acknowledging the importance of self-statements and self-rewards</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Initiating own activities</td>
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<td>• Developing leadership skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peer Issues</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Choosing friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Developing peer leadership, versus followership, skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dealing with conflict among friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recognizing and using alternatives to aggression and violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Appreciating being included in a group.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family Issues</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Negotiating conflict between parents’ values and peers’ values in such areas as clothing, music, and the importance of and time devoted to schoolwork</td>
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<td>• Learning about the stages in adults’ and their parents’ lives</td>
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<td>• Appreciating rituals (adults must ensure that the glitz doesn’t overwhelm the meaning of formal rites of passage; rites must include appreciation, belonging, aforementioned competencies, and the teens’ contributions, as well as fun.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Competencies</strong></td>
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<td>Middle school students are capable of understanding their role in a larger interdependent society and the following areas may be of interest to them as their world expands:</td>
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<td>• Working democratically; working with government and the media</td>
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<td>• Developing an appreciation of the environment (for example, Spaceship Earth, earth as a habitat, ecological environments, global interdependence, and ecosystems)</td>
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<td>• Developing sensitivity to prejudice, freedom, citizenship, and liberty</td>
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<td>• Understanding and accepting differences in one’s community</td>
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<td>• Identifying and resisting negative group influences</td>
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<td>• Becoming involved in community projects</td>
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<td>• Apprenticing and training for leadership roles.</td>
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<td><strong>Social Skills</strong></td>
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<td>During the middle level years, teens encounter interpersonal conflicts. This is a good time for them to develop negotiation skills they can use as adults:</td>
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• Work in groups as team players and as leaders
• Build positive relationships with many different kinds of people
• Be thoughtful problem solvers and decision makers
• Bounce back from roadblocks.

Confidence follows competence and allows teenagers to explore new identities, to take positive risks, and to stretch themselves. In so doing, they expand their competencies. When these efforts are enhanced by caring support and humor, setbacks—even at this sensitive age—are not

**KEY ADOLESCENT COMPETENCIES FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

**The Big Picture**
In high school, educators should be less concerned about teaching “small” skills and more concerned about how to teach teens to integrate the skills they possess. The best time to teach teens new skills is when they recognize new skills are needed to accomplish something that they want to accomplish. Here are the areas in which teens need skills to move ahead with confidence, followed by a list of competencies to help teens develop and further build their confidence.

**Areas for Confidence and Accomplishment**
- Maintaining positive relationships with peers, adults, authority figures, and parents
- Being healthy—establishing good habits in diet and nutrition; sleep; personal hygiene; and physical exercise, sports, and dance
- Becoming a knowledgeable, responsible, nonviolent, caring citizen—contributing to community service or environmental projects, understanding how the government works and participating in it
- Dealing with love and loss
- Functioning with emotional intelligence in a workplace
- Earning and budgeting money
- Planning and preparing for a career
- Developing personal goals and interests, including hobbies, clubs, and future education plans
- Meeting responsibilities
- Finding outlets for ideas, creativity, and inventiveness
- Encountering and nurturing one’s spirituality.

**Social Skills**
High school students are ready to develop the interpersonal skills they will need as adults:

**Peer Issues**
- Behaving effectively in peer groups
- Showing peer leadership and responsible membership
- Using request and refusal skills
- Initiating and maintaining cross-gender friends and romantic relationships
- Understanding responsible behavior at social events
- Dealing with drinking and driving.

**Family Issues**
- Maintaining a level of mutual interdependence, autonomy, and connectedness
- Talking with parents about daily activities, learning self-disclosure skills
- Preparing for parenting and family responsibilities.

**How Schools Can Help**
- Encourage students to recognize their personal strengths
- Help teens make realistic academic plans
- Encourage persistence in achieving goals despite setbacks
- Help them plan career and postsecondary pathways
- Give students opportunities to develop effective group participation and interpersonal skills, including negotiation and teamwork skills
- Help them find avenues for contributing to their classrooms and schools—for example, school and community service, volunteer work, and mentorships with younger students.

devastating. (See sidebars for a more detailed discussion of competencies in middle level and high school-aged youth.)

Contribution

Feeling a sense of contribution, selflessness, and generosity is essential for the development of a healthy identity in adolescents. We hear a lot about adolescents' tendency to be self-centered, but that is really because these years are so much about self-discovery. It is not selfishness—unless we allow it to go in that direction.

Teens thrive on helping: making contributions to causes, saving the environment, helping senior citizens, teaching what they know to younger and needier kids, helping in political campaigns, or raising funds for people who are suffering.

Feeling like a contributing member of a group is an important part of what makes us well-balanced, caring people. Schools can help adolescents become caring contributors in several ways: Marian Wright Edelman, child advocate and educator, has said, “Service is the rent each of us pays for living.” How is this idea put into action? At La Salle Academy in Providence, R.I., any student who wants to be a member of a sports team, varsity or intramural, must develop and sign a contract that states three goals in each of three areas: How will you improve yourself in your sport? How will you improve your team? How will you improve your school or community? These powerful questions create in students a deep sense of respect for their classmates and a strong connection to their community.

Concluding Thoughts

Middle level schools represent the beginning of a series of challenges that strongly affect how much energy and focus students will devote to academic learning. Students are available to be captured by the “big picture” issues that are stimulated by their emerging quest for a sense of identity and future roles. Middle school students must develop all facets of their multiple intelligence, including their “emotional quotient” if they are to be well-prepared for the social-emotional and intellectual challenges of high school.

References


For More Information
