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Characteristics of Middle Grade Students

"Characteristics of Middle Grade Students," *Caught in the Middle (1989)*. Sacramento: California Department of Education, pages 144-148.

A. Intellectual Development

Middle Grade Students:

1. Display a wide range of individual intellectual development as their minds experience transition from the concrete-manipulatory stage to the capacity for abstract thought. This transition ultimately makes possible:
 - Propositional thought
 - Consideration of ideas contrary to fact
 - Reasoning with hypotheses involving two or more variables
 - Appreciation for the elegance of mathematical logic expressed in symbols
 - Insight into the nuances of poetic metaphor and musical notation. Analysis of the power of a political ideology
 - Ability to project thought into the future, to anticipate, and to formulate goals
 - Insight into the sources of previously unquestioned attitudes, behaviors, and values
 - Interpretation of larger concepts and generalizations of traditional wisdom expressed through sayings, axioms, and aphorisms
2. Are intensely curious;
3. Prefer active over passive learning experiences; favor interaction with peers during learning activities;
4. Exhibit a strong willingness to learn things they consider to be useful; enjoy using skills to solve real life problems;
5. Are egocentric; argue to convince others; exhibit independent, critical thought;
6. Consider academic goals as a secondary level of priority; personal social concerns dominate thoughts and activities;
7. Experience the phenomenon of metacognition – the ability to know what one knows and does not know.
8. Are intellectually at-risk; face decisions that have the potential to affect major academic values with lifelong consequences.

B. Physical Development

Middle Grade Students:

1. Experience accelerated physical development marked by increases' in weight, height, heart size, lung capacity, and muscular strength;
2. Mature at varying rates of speed. Girls tend to be taller than boys for the first two years of early adolescence and are ordinarily more physically developed than boys;
3. Experience bone growth faster than muscle development; uneven muscle/bone development results in lack of coordination and awkwardness; bones may lack protection of covering muscles and supporting tendons;
4. Reflect a wide range of individual differences which begin to appear in prepubertal and pubertal stages of

development. Boys tend to lag behind girls. There are marked individual differences in physical development for boys and girls. The greatest variability in physiological development and size occurs at about age thirteen;

5. Experience biological development five years sooner than adolescents of the last century; the average age of menarche has dropped from seventeen to twelve years of age;
6. Face responsibility for sexual behavior before full emotional and social maturity has occurred;
7. Show changes in body contour including temporarily large noses, protruding ears, long arms; have posture problems;
8. Are often disturbed by body changes:
 - Girls are anxious about physical changes that accompany sexual maturation;
 - Boys are anxious about receding chins, cowlicks, dimples, and changes in their voices;
9. Experience fluctuations in basal metabolism which can cause extreme restlessness at times and equally extreme listlessness at other moments;
10. Have ravenous appetites and peculiar tastes; may overtax digestive system with large quantities of *improper* foods;
11. Lack physical health; have poor levels of endurance, strength, and flexibility; as a group are fatter and unhealthier;
12. Are physically at-risk; major causes of death are homicide, suicide, accident, and leukemia.

c. Psychological Development

Middle Grade Students:

1. Are often erratic and inconsistent in their behavior; anxiety and fear are contrasted with periods of bravado; feelings shift between superiority and inferiority;
2. Have chemical and hormonal imbalances which often trigger emotions that are frightening and poorly understood; may regress to more childish behavior patterns at this point;
3. Are easily offended and are sensitive to criticism of personal shortcomings;
4. Tend to exaggerate simple occurrences and believe that personal problems, experiences, and feelings are unique to themselves;
5. Are moody, restless; often feel self-conscious and alienated; lack self esteem; are introspective;
6. Are searching for adult identity and acceptance even in the midst of intense peer group relationships;
7. Are vulnerable to naive opinions, one-sided arguments;
8. Are searching to form a conscious sense of individual uniqueness "Who am I?";
9. Have emerging sense of humor based on increased intellectual ability to see abstract relationships; appreciate the "double entendre";
10. Are basically optimistic, hopeful;
11. Are psychologically at-risk; at no other point in human development is an individual likely to encounter so much diversity in relation to oneself and others.

d. Social Development

Middle Grade Students:

1. Experience often traumatic conflicts due to conflicting loyalties to peer groups and family;

2. Refer to peers as sources for standards and models of behavior; media heroes and heroines are also singularly important in shaping both behavior and fashion;
3. May be rebellious towards parents but still strongly dependent on parental values; want to make own choices, but the authority of the family is a critical factor in ultimate decisions;
4. Are impacted by high level of mobility in society; may become anxious and disoriented when peer group ties are broken because of family relocation to other communities;
5. Are often confused and frightened by new school settings which are large and impersonal;
6. Act out unusual or drastic behavior at times; may be aggressive, daring, boisterous, argumentative;
7. Are fiercely loyal to peer group values; sometimes cruel or insensitive to those outside the peer group;
8. Want to know and feel that significant adults, including parents and teachers, love and accept them; need frequent affirmation;
9. Sense negative impact of adolescent behaviors on parents and teachers; realize thin edge between tolerance and rejection; feelings of adult rejection drive the adolescent into the relatively secure social environment of the peer group;
10. Strive to define sex role characteristics; search to establish positive social relationships with members of the same and opposite sex;
11. Experience low risk-trust relationships with adults who show lack of sensitivity to adolescent characteristics and needs;
12. Challenge authority figures; test limits of acceptable behavior;
13. Are socially at-risk; adult values are largely shaped conceptually during adolescence; negative interactions with peers, parents, and teachers may compromise ideals and commitments.

E. Moral and Ethical Development

Middle Grade Students:

1. Are essentially idealistic; have a strong sense of fairness in human relationships;
2. Experience thoughts and feelings of awe and wonder related to their expanding intellectual and emotional awareness;
3. Ask large, unanswerable questions about the meaning of life; do not expect absolute answers but are turned off by trivial adult responses;
4. Are reflective, analytical, and introspective about their thoughts and feelings;
5. Confront hard moral and ethical questions for which they are unprepared to cope;
6. Are at-risk in the development of moral and ethical choices and behaviors; primary dependency on the influences of home and church for moral and ethical development seriously compromises adolescents for whom these resources are absent; adolescents want to explore the moral and ethical issues which are confronted in the curriculum, in the media, and in the daily interactions they experience in their families and peer groups.

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