Early Adolescents’ Development Across the Middle School Years: Implications for School Counselors

This article discusses development during the early adolescent years with a focus on recent research on the biological, cognitive, self-identity, and motivational changes that occur during this time period and the implications of this research for middle school counselors. Peer influences on early adolescents also are discussed, with the issue of school bullying receiving special attention. Studies are presented about how positive relations between teachers and students, and counselors and students, can ease the transition. Research is presented showing the positive effects of counseling programs designed to ease students’ transition into middle school, along with suggestions for restructuring the roles of middle school counselors in order to be responsive to the developmental needs of early adolescents.

DEVELOPMENT DURING EARLY ADOLESCENCE

Biological Changes at Early Adolescence

The biological changes that occur at early adolescence are dramatic, as anyone working with this age group knows (Susman & Rogel, 2004). We note here two issues with respect to pubertal development that are particularly germane to middle school counselors. First, the timing of puberty is quite different for girls and boys. Girls enter puberty approximately 18 months before boys do, which means during early adolescence, girls and boys of the same chronological age are at quite different points in their physical development, which can complicate their relationships.

Second, there also are differences within each gender group with respect to when children begin puberty; some enter puberty relatively early, and others relatively late compared to their age-mates. Early maturity can be advantageous for boys, particularly with respect to their participation in sports activities and social standing in school, although the findings for boys are not always consistent and change over time. For instance, Ge et al. (2003) found that fifth-grade early-maturing boys report more depressive symptoms than do late-maturing or on-time boys, but by seventh grade this no longer is the case. For girls the evidence is more consistent and shows that early maturity is especially problematic. Early-maturing girls are the first to experience pubertal changes and so can feel out of sync with their age-mates, thus experiencing greater depression and other adjustment issues (e.g., Ge, Conger, & Elder, 2001; Ge et al., 2003). The challenges for early-maturing girls continue over time, particularly if they face other life stressors (Ge et al., 2001). Further, Simmons and Blyth (1987) reported that early-maturing girls have the most difficulty adjusting to school transitions, particularly the transition from elementary to middle school.

Given the effects of pubertal change on behavior, it is important for middle school counselors to be...
aware of early adolescents' phase of pubertal development, in order to understand the possible effects that pubertal development could be having on children's behavior in school and with friends. The two groups to be most concerned about are early-maturing girls and late-maturing boys. In each case, and perhaps particularly for early-maturing girls, pubertal development may interfere with early adolescents' focus on school, as it can impact their social relations and overall adjustment. Counselors' sensitivity to the impact of pubertal changes may help early adolescents deal better with these changes.

Cognitive Changes at Early Adolescence

Early adolescents' thinking also changes in significant ways during this developmental period and these changes have implications for counseling students of this age (see Keating, 2004; Wigfield et al., in press). Adolescents increasingly engage in abstract thinking, consider the hypothetical as well as the real, engage in more sophisticated and elaborate information-processing strategies, and reflect on oneself and complicated problems (see Keating). Scholars now do not believe that these thought processes emerge at adolescence, but instead that adolescents' increasing ability to organize and reflect on the information that they have allows them to engage more readily in these higher-order thinking processes (Wigfield et al., in press). Adolescents' reasoning skills and decision-making abilities also increase, but adolescents are more likely to engage in risky behaviors than are young adults, which calls into question how advanced their decision-making skills are. So overall the picture of cognitive development in adolescence is mixed; there are important advances, but important remaining limitations as well (Keating).

There is a growing body of research showing that the brain changes in significant ways during adolescence (Byrnes, 2001; Keating, 2004). Researchers using imaging techniques such as fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) have found that there is reorganization of synaptic connections, which may enhance information processing. There are also changes in the levels of different neurotransmitters in the areas of the brain that control emotional functioning, which could relate to the emotional swings many adolescents experience (Keating). The prefrontal cortex, which controls executive functioning, becomes fully mature during late adolescence, which could relate to the changes in cognition discussed above. Researchers are beginning to connect changes in brain structure and functioning to cognition and behavior, with decision making being one area of particular interest (Byrnes, 1998; Keating). However, the specific ways in which brain structure relates to cognition and behavior remain elusive at this point (Byrnes, 2001). Research over the next decade likely will enhance greatly our understanding of the relations of brain structure and function to adolescents' cognition and behavior.

Two major implications for middle school counselors emerge from this work. First, at this point in the state of knowledge about brain development, counselors should be wary of programs that claim to link particular behaviors to the changes in brain structure and function that occur during adolescence. Second, early adolescents' increasing cognitive sophistication means that school counseling programs can be geared to this higher-level thinking, helping adolescents to focus on the future and the possibilities it may hold. However, because adolescents' decision-making skills appear to lag behind their overall cognitive development, programs focusing on enhancing decision making in different areas of early adolescents' lives may be particularly beneficial to them.

Self-Concept, Self-Esteem, and Identity Development at Early Adolescence

Development of the self-system takes center stage during adolescence (see Harter, 1999, for review). Because the different terms in this literature often are used interchangeably, we begin this section by defining the major terms. Self-concept is individuals' beliefs about and evaluations of their characteristics, roles, abilities, and relationships. Self-esteem is the individual's sense of his or her overall worth or value as a person. Identity is a term broader than either self-concept or self-esteem, referring to individuals' general sense of themselves and their psychological reality that includes many different beliefs and attitudes about the self (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005).

Identity formation involves the successful negotiation of a variety of activities and relationships during adolescence, including school achievement, social relations with others, and development of career interests and choices, along with a great deal of exploration of different activities and roles (Harter, 1999). One's gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation all are important to adolescents' developing identity. Integrating these experiences and characteristics into a coherent sense of self is fundamental to identity formation, and researchers have proposed different phases of the identity development process (Marcia, 1980; Waterman, 1982). Adolescents' focus on identity likely stems in part from the cognitive changes discussed, as well as their understanding that childhood is ending and the adult phase of their life is about to begin.

With respect to self-concept, educational and developmental researchers most often measure it as a sense of competence or ability for different activity areas (e.g., Harter, 1990). Research has shown...
that there are clearly separable dimensions of self-concept even in young children; that is, quite early on, children have differentiated views of themselves, and so during early adolescence these beliefs are defined clearly. In general, children's beliefs about their ability in different school subject areas seem to decline at least through the early adolescent years (for review, see Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, in press). An important implication of this work for middle school counselors is that early adolescents' clearly defined sense of their abilities in different areas means that it may take stronger efforts to enhance the beliefs of students who doubt their abilities, as these doubts are more deep-seated than they are in elementary school. Students' beliefs about themselves still can be changed during middle school, but perhaps not as easily.

Researchers also have examined mean-level change in self-esteem across early adolescence. Research shows that early adolescents' self-esteem is lowest immediately after the transition into junior high school in seventh grade, but it increases during students' seventh-grade year (Wigfield, Eccles, M ller, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). Blyth, Simmons, and Carlton-Ford (1983) found that for most, self-esteem scores increase across middle adolescence (see also O'Malley & Bachman, 1983). An important implication of this work for school counselors is that self-esteem may be most vulnerable during the early phase of middle school. This seems to be particularly true for early adolescents experiencing several transitions, such as puberty, school change, and changes in family and peer relations (Eccles, 2004).

How do self-concept and self-esteem relate to one another? Harter (1990) proposed that self-esteem is highest when children and adolescents believe they are competent at activities that are important to them, and when their social relations are positive. Those with low self-esteem lack competence in areas they deem important (e.g., an adolescent who thinks excelling at basketball is very important but who does not make the school team) and/or have difficult relations with peers, family members, and teachers. Harter's work also has important implications for middle school counselors. Helping early adolescents identify their competencies and matching them to how important the activities are to them will foster self-esteem development. Thus, one focus of counseling programs in middle school could be to help students make reasonable matches between their competence beliefs and what is important to them.

Changes in Early Adolescents' Achievement Motivation

Much of the recent work on students' achievement motivation focuses on adolescents' beliefs, values, and goals as crucial influences on their motivation (Wigfield, Eccles et al., in press). Researchers looking at how these beliefs, goals, and values change during early and middle adolescence often have found that students' motivation declines during this period (Wigfield, Eccles et al.). Specifically, early adolescents have lower perceptions of their competence for different school subjects than do their younger peers (Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield et al., 1991). Students' valuing of different school subjects often declines as they move through school, with the declines especially marked across the transition to middle school (Wigfield et al., 1991). Their intrinsic motivation for learning often decreases as well (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 2001).

The most important implication of this work for middle school counselors is that motivational problems can become more central during early adolescence. This can be a time period in which students' motivation declines in significant ways. Counselors can help identify children most at risk of becoming demotivated at school, and work with teachers to help foster these adolescents' motivation.

CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Peer Relations at Early Adolescence

Friends can help each other through major life transitions, such as the school transitions that adolescents experience (Rubin, Coplan, Chen, Buskirk, & Wojslawowicz, 2005). Unfortunately, the middle school transition often disrupts early adolescents' friendships, as they go to a new school and may not have much contact (at least initially) with their friends from elementary school, and as children from the same elementary school often are split into many different classes and groups in middle school.

Although pressure from peers to engage in misconduct does increase during adolescence, many researchers disagree with the simplistic view that peer groups mostly have a bad influence on adolescents (Brown, 2004). Brown reviewed studies showing that it is poor parenting that sometimes leads children to get in with a "bad" peer group, rather than the peer group pulling the child into difficulties. He also argued that adolescents usually seek similar peers. This means that those involved in sports will have other athletes as friends, those serious about school will seek those kinds of friends, and those less involved in school may form groups. Thus, for many adolescents, the peer group acts more to reinforce predispositions, rather than to change adolescents' characteristics in a major way (Ryan, 2001).

One concern with respect to social relations at
adolescence that is particularly important to middle school counselors is bullying and peer violence, and broader issues of school safety. Fighting increases during the middle school years, and more students are bullied in middle school than in either elementary or high school (Juvonen, L., Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004). Being bullied is associated with many negative developmental outcomes, including loneliness, depression, and social anxiety, as well as lower school performance (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2001). Victimization occurs at the individual level but also can include groups of children; some low-status groups of children (e.g., those whom other adolescents perceive as “nerds”) are at risk for being rejected and victimized at school. Counselors can play an important role in creating safer school environments where bullying and other forms of violence are less likely to occur, which would help more students have successful middle school experiences. This could be done with school-wide programs focusing on reducing violence and aggression at school, or work with individual children who either are bullies or are prone to being bullied.

Relations with Teachers and Counselors During Early Adolescence

Relations with teachers and counselors can become a very important source of support to many early adolescents, particularly because their relations with their parents often become more distant during this time period (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Unfortunately, middle school students often report that the quality of their relations with their teachers has declined from what it was in elementary school (e.g., Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). The explanations frequently given for such negative changes are the differences in the amount of time that elementary and middle school teachers spend with their students and the number of students that middle school teachers teach. Middle school teachers only see students one period per day, making it more difficult to get to know them, and also teach many more students.

The development of positive relations between counselors and students also can ease students’ transitions from elementary to middle school. However, when compared with the literature on teacher relations with students, there is a paucity of research on student relations with counselors (particularly with respect to the middle school transition); this is a gap in the literature that needs to be addressed. Traditionally, there are two to three counselors in a given middle school, and their primary roles are to help with student scheduling, monitor and work with students with behavioral problems, and provide career advice. The student-to-counselor ratio or the numerous diffuse tasks they do may limit middle school counselors’ ability to develop close relationships with many students.

As mentioned earlier, the transition from elementary school to middle school often coincides with a decline in students’ academic motivation. This decline, though, is clearly not inevitable, and one of the factors that appears to work as a buffer against it is positive relations with one’s teachers (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Wentzel, 2002). Teacher support appears to play a significant role in the amount of academic effort that adolescents exert, their positive social behavior (such as the extent to which they follow classroom rules), and their well-being (Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003; Wentzel). Although this has not been studied directly with respect to students’ relations with middle school counselors, similar results may occur when counselors are able to provide students with the supports that they need.

Many middle schools have implemented daily or weekly programs to provide greater teacher support for individual students or groups of students. These include school-wide programs to deal with general developmental and academic issues (Galassi & Gulledge, 1997) and specific programs for students who appear at risk for dropping out of school (Blum & Jones, 1993; Greene & Ollendick, 1993). Teacher commitment to these programs seems a crucial variable in ensuring their success (Blum & Jones; Greene & Ollendick), and counselors can play an important role in facilitating this commitment.

Most of the studies done on the effects of teacher support have focused on middle-class European American students. Students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds or those who are experiencing stressful events may be even more likely to need supportive relationships with teachers to adjust well to middle school (Wentzel, 2002). Accordingly, when such students perceive that their teachers do not care for or support them, there may be larger costs. Katz (1999) painted a sobering portrait of the negative relations between eight Latino immigrant seventh-grade students from a poor, crime-ridden neighborhood—who were bused for the purpose of desegregation to a school attended largely by more privileged, high-achieving Asian American and European American adolescents—and their teachers of various ethnicities. These students described their yearning for respect from their teachers as largely unfulfilled, and they contended that their teachers’ intolerance and lack of helpfulness precipitated their academic and behavioral difficulties in school.

In a similar fashion, some have suggested that counselors need to pay particular attention to students of color and students who are economically disadvantaged (House & Hayes, 2002). Clemente and Collison (2000) argued for counselor prepara-
tion programs that include courses on psycholinguistics and multiculturalism, cooperative teamwork between counselors and English as a Second Language teachers, and interventions that are sensitive to students' cultures and developmental levels. Cook and Kaffenberger (2003) implemented a counseling intervention involving structured group counseling designed for students of color and economically disadvantaged students. The program focused on teaching study skills, setting academic goals, involving parents, and fostering positive attitudes about academic achievement. The program had positive effects on many students' grade-point averages, both in the short and longer term. Teachers and counselors reported that a majority of the students participating in the program changed their behaviors and attitudes in positive ways. Cook and Kaffenberger attributed this in part to the students in this program becoming more connected to school.

**MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSELING PROGRAMS AND EARLY ADOLESCENTS' DEVELOPMENT**

In this final section, we discuss some specific middle school counseling programs designed to enhance certain developmental outcomes (academic, social, self-esteem, and motivational outcomes). We also discuss recent recommendations for how middle school counselors' roles should be structured to make school counseling more effective for early adolescents. One important general point is that counselors should begin to implement school transition programs in the year before the transition to middle school, to help students prepare for the transition and to allow the programs to adjust to student needs throughout the transition year (see Akos, 2002). Students and parents have a variety of concerns about what will happen to them once they begin middle school. Orientation programs facilitated by middle school counselors appear very helpful in alleviating these concerns (Akos, Creamer, & Masina, 2004).

**Academic and Social Outcomes and School Counseling**

With the No Child Left Behind Act, there is increased pressure on counselors to work with teachers to focus on academic outcomes, to help narrow the achievement gap and ensure that more students do well in middle school (see Akos, this issue). Part of this process could be helping students adjust to their new school environment. Akos (2002, 2004) and Akos and Galassi (2004) studied how students perceive the transition from elementary to middle school, and they found that the primary concerns of transitioning students involved how much homework they would have as well as expectations, rules, and responsibilities in the new environment. An important implication of this work for middle school counselors is that they should take care to include procedural and organizational components in transition programs, along with academic strategies.

There is scant research on the effectiveness of counseling programs on middle schoolers' academic and social outcomes, but the existing research shows that such programs can be beneficial. Brigman and Campbell (2003) studied a counseling intervention involving group counseling sessions and classroom guidance lessons that included building skills such as goal setting, conflict resolution, and career awareness. The program was implemented with fifth, sixth, eighth, and ninth graders. They found that participation was positively correlated with academic achievement and school behavior measures. In addition, Lapan, Gysbers, and Petroski (2003) studied counseling programs in 184 schools; the counseling activities included increasing time spent in the classroom, providing guidance for personal problems as well as career planning, maintaining communication with parents and school personnel, and performing both individual and group counseling sessions. Seventh graders in schools with such programs reported higher grades, a higher utility value of education, and stronger teacher relationships, after controlling for school- and student-level variables.

**Self-Esteem, Motivation, and School Counseling**

As previously mentioned, early adolescents' self-esteem and motivation may be particularly vulnerable at transition times in the middle school years (Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Wigfield et al., 1991). Scott (1999) suggested that school counselors and other school personnel can play an essential role in early adolescent psychological well-being by modeling high self-esteem. Several suggestions were made as to how personnel could use their high levels of self-esteem to best impact students (e.g., appearing friendly, helpful, and facilitative, as opposed to controlling). Modeling success at difficult tasks requiring effort was argued to be an approach that may enhance student self-esteem and motivation, as opposed to displaying one's cognitive functioning as flawless, which may not promote early adolescents' confidence in their ability to be successful. If middle school counselors are cognizant of influences they can have on student self-esteem, perhaps dips in self-esteem associated with transition periods can be lessened.

Lambie (2004) discussed a program called Motivational Enhancement Therapy, which, as its name implies, focuses on enhancing adolescents' motivation in school. The program involves individual meetings of counselors and students focused on
helping students be aware of the motivational issues they face rather than denying them, and working with the students to develop lasting strategies to maintain their motivation and achievement. The techniques used in this program could be adapted to middle school.

**Recommendations for Redefining the Middle School Counselor’s Role**

Recently, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2003) presented the ASCA National Model® to guide development and implementation of school counseling programs through a framework designed to promote students’ development in academic, career, and personal/social domains. This model includes a guidance curriculum that incorporates developmental lessons in academic achievement, career planning, and personal/social development into students’ schooling. This framework also recognizes the traditional counseling role involving services responsive to students’ immediate needs as necessitated by life circumstances as an integral part of school counseling. In addition, to aid students in the development of personal goals as well as career plans, individual student planning activities are part of the model. ASCA emphasizes that it is not just students at risk or high achievers who require counseling, but that counseling programs and services are beneficial and should be directed to all students. At the middle school level, awareness of the developmental characteristics of early adolescents could be an important addition to the model.

The National Middle School Association (NMSA; 2001, n.d.) also presented recommendations for school counselors to ease early adolescents’ transition to middle-level schools. NMSA recognizes the complex social and educational transition at this time, and it encourages counselors to be actively involved as students negotiate this transition. Specific recommendations include (a) counselors working collaboratively with teachers and counselors in elementary schools, particularly to acknowledge curricular differences across schools; (b) counselors educating parents about issues related to the middle school transition; (c) the importance of counseling about the transition at both the elementary and middle school levels; and (d) counselors providing activities, curricula, and services aimed specifically at easing the transition to middle school. These recommendations are commendable in part because they tie clearly to the developmental characteristics of early adolescents; however, there needs to be research on their effectiveness as they are implemented. In one study that can be related to this approach, Akos and Martin (2003) found that a five-session training model focused on academic, organizational, and personal/social issues led to a decline in the concerns middle school students expressed about their middle school experiences.

Researchers have made suggestions for improving counseling during middle school. For example, Galassi and Akos (2004) developed a developmental advocacy counseling model, which adds promotion of student development to prevention and remediation foci. This model can be utilized by school counselors helping students with the adjustment to middle school to not only prevent and address issues with the transition, but also to proactively promote optimal youth development at this time of adjustment. Collaboration with parents, teachers, and administrators is encouraged to create an environment that cultivates growth in academic, career, and personal/social competencies. Diversity and social justice initiatives also are emphasized to foster development and meet student needs.

**CONCLUSION**

The early adolescent period is one marked by many changes in biological and psychological characteristics and in relations with peers, teachers, and counselors. The transition to middle school can be difficult for early adolescents, especially those struggling with the changes in other areas of their lives. Middle school counselors and teachers can ease this transition and help early adolescents negotiate successfully the many changes they experience. Particularly recommended to accomplish this include (a) cooperation among counselors, teachers, and administrators; (b) involvement of parents; (c) programs and curricula to foster students’ development in multiple domains (i.e., academic, social, career); (d) responsive counseling to assist with personal issues; (e) cultural awareness and sensitivity; and (f) advocacy for and attention to the diverse needs of all students. A focus on the particular developmental issues that early adolescents face should be an important part of all middle school counseling programs.

**References**


