

10 Truths Middle Schoolers Should Know

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It's rare to hear anyone say they *loved* middle school. Even people with positive memories never tout it as the best years of their life.

Simply put, it's an awkward season. It's a time of constant changes, social shake-ups, swinging emotions, and intense pressures. If I've learned anything from working with adolescent girls, it's how hungry this age group is for comfort and reassurance. I hear it in their voices and see it in their eyes whenever I speak to a group, a look of searching and a longing to hear something — anything — to help them make sense of things.

Please tell me it gets better, their faces silently plead. Tell me this isn't it.

Well, middle schoolers, I assure you that life picks up. There's a bigger, more promising world beyond this rite of passage. In the meantime, I have 10 truths to center you. I hope they bring you peace and a little friendly guidance.

Truth #10: Today's most awkward moments will be tomorrow's funniest memories. Keep a sense of humor whenever possible.

Those braces on your teeth that collect food? That acne on your face that miracle creams can't cure? That giddy rush you get when your crush walks by, and you can't think, talk, or see straight? One day these things will be really funny! They'll be the memories you rehash again and again with your siblings and oldest friends.

It takes time, but as you gain confidence, your awkward moments become fun to share. You'll readily admit yours and laugh at the comedy and conversation that result.

Eventually you'll have a dazzling smile, clear skin, and someone to love. Your current problems will have closure. So stay mindful of the big picture, and remember that even your worst experiences will pass.

Truth #9: You don't want to peak in middle school (or high school or college, for that matter). The worst goal you can have is popularity. Because what often makes adolescents popular — running with the fast crowd, dominating your peers, living a superficial lifestyle — eventually leads to problems.

A truly successful person gets better with time. You go from being version 1.0 of yourself to version 2.0, 4.0, 6.0, and so on. But when you chase popularity, you peak early. You stop growing and improving because you're stuck in instant gratification mode, looking for quick fixes to satisfy your needs.

Make it your goal to peak later in life. Make good choices that set you up for a bright future. If you're not a superstar now, that's OK. This simply means there are better things ahead as you continue to evolve and learn.

Truth #8: Technology makes it easier than ever to ruin relationships and reputations. We live in an age where people post everything online — feelings, emotions, and pictures. I love technology when it's used wisely, but too often, it's used impulsively. We let our fingers jump ahead of our brains, and within seconds, we can trigger hurt, misunderstandings, and serious issues.

So please, think twice before texting, emailing, or posting on social media. Cool off before giving someone a piece of your mind, venting, jumping to conclusions, reacting out of jealousy or anger, embarrassing someone, or sending an inappropriate photo. Use the Internet for good, not as a dumping ground.

And when you have an issue with a friend, call instead of sending texts. It's easy to put in writing what you'd never say in person, or to interpret a message the wrong way, and the tension this adds to a relationship is hard to recover from.

Truth #7: Surrounding yourself with good company is imperative. There's an old saying that's particularly relevant to your age group: "Show me your friends and I'll show you your future."

Yes, you're called to love everyone, but not everyone deserves a place in your innermost circle. Some people you love up close and personal, and others you love at arm's length because inviting them into your life invites disaster.

Sooner or later, a bad influence will rub off. You'll either make choices against your better judgment or wind up in a predicament. As a mom I know told her daughter, she once went out with a guy who was very sweet to her but also wild. She didn't see the issue until they had their first date — and he took her to a drug dealer's house.

She told her daughter, "Even though I was innocent, I would have gone to jail if the police had come. I was guilty by association just by being there."

Good friends lift you up. They don't put you in risky or compromising situations. To become the best version of yourself, you need friends who hold themselves to high standards and want you to reach your full potential, too.

Truth #6: What makes you different is what makes you great. Middle school is largely about conformity. I see this firsthand because I live near a middle school, and over time I've noticed how all the kids dress alike, walk alike, and act alike.

Meanwhile, at my children's elementary school, I see authenticity and diverse personalities because the kids don't yet know how to be anything but themselves. It saddens me to know that they, too, will eventually feel pressured to hide what makes them unique.

You'll never influence the world by trying to be like everyone else in it. You'll never find your calling by following the crowd. God made you different for a reason, and what sets you apart plays into His plan for you. So listen to that quiet voice inside you and remember yourself as a child. Cling to the passions you had in your early years, because they hold more answers than you know.

Truth #5: It's OK not to have your life planned out. It's OK if you haven't discovered your "thing." Chances are, you know kids with immense talent and drive. They've trained for years in their area of expertise, and they know exactly what they want in life.

Deep down you may be envious and uncomfortable, because you fear you're getting left behind. You wonder why they have their act together — and you don't.

But even the best-laid plans will face curveballs. Even the most driven kids will wind up on different paths from those they had originally envisioned. So if your future isn't mapped out by ninth grade, take heart! You're still young and have plenty of time to discover what you were born to do. Just set goals for yourself, use your gifts, and head in a good direction. Set a positive trajectory so that when you do discover your thing, you're ready to soar.

Truth #4: Your uniform is not your identity. Labels are big in middle school, and there's a confidence that comes from wearing a football jersey, cheerleader uniform, or other type of team attire.

But remember that having a uniform — or even designer clothes — doesn't increase your worth. You're special because of who you are, not what you put on your body or what you achieve.

Overnight you can lose your place on a team. You can lose your talents, your wardrobe, your relationships, even your Instagram account. But if you base your identity on the one thing you'll never lose — God's love — your foundation is unshakable. You'll still be standing even if you lose every earthly trapping this world says is important.

Truth #3: Applause can be misleading. You can make a huge mistake and still get cheered on wildly. Through social media, popularity is now quantifiable. You can gauge your performance by how many "likes," comments, and shares you get.

But remember, numbers alone can be misleading. To get the full picture, you need to measure numbers against the truth. The best applause to live for is the quiet peace inside you. What makes you feel good about yourself? What helps you rest easy at night? Criticizing someone to bring them down or make people laugh won't bring you peace. Neither will watching someone else beat up on a kid as the crowd cheers him on.

You know the truth by how you feel deep down. And when you seek your applause from within, you don't need the applause of public approval.

Truth #2: There's a difference between helpful advice and criticism that holds you back. Be careful who you listen to. Some people want you to succeed. Others don't. Develop a strong filter for whose words you take to heart — and whose words you ignore.

Some questions to ask yourself are: Do I trust this person? Are they respectable? Do they practice what they preach? Are they the kind of person I hope to become? Do they recognize my talent and potential and encourage me, or do they drag me down by harping on where I fall short?

How others talk to you influences how you talk to yourself. And since that voice in your head impacts your confidence, determination, and willingness to take risks, you want people in your life who speak the truth in love and always with your best interest in mind.

Truth #1: You're AWESOME. Truly, you are. All these crazy changes are leading to something amazing. In the grand scheme of life, middle school is only a blip, so keep it in check. Have fun, dream big, and make good choices. One day you'll look back and laugh at the absurdities of this stage, and, if you're lucky, you'll enjoy a lot of humor now.

*This post originally appeared on karikampakis.com. Find Kari on Facebook or check out her new book for teen & tween girls, *10 Ultimate Truths Girls Should Know*, released by Thomas Nelson.*