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## LOCAL NEWS

### Middle Schoolers face special academic hurdles

by Dr. Raymond Huntington  
*Baltimore Times*  
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Remember the days when your son or daughter rushed in from school, gave you a big hug and gleefully sought praise for a top grade on an assignment or test? That may seem like ancient history if your child is now in middle school. More likely you've noticed your child shying away from physical affection, experiencing odd and dramatic mood swings, and becoming a lot more interested in popularity and peer pressure than pleasing you.

If so, you're not alone. From the chat rooms of popular parenting Web sites, to the pages of parenting magazines to school and community forums around the nation, scores of parents of children going through the "tween" years will tell you they're going through troubled times as well. Many will also tell you that these issues are having a serious impact on their children's progress in school. Children who are grappling with social and emotional pressures are often distracted in the classroom and too preoccupied to give homework the attention it deserves.

This is particularly troublesome given the increasing demands of middle school learning. In mathematics, lessons in basic computation are giving way to complex problem-solving. In reading, lessons focus more on comprehension, and require students to articulate what they have learned in oral and written form. Subjects ranging from Science to History to the Social Studies likewise require more critical thinking. And progress in all of these subjects becomes especially vital for building a foundation for increasingly challenging work in high school and beyond.

So while in many ways school may be getting "harder"—or at least more complex—your child's equally complex behavioral changes can make learning a volatile proposition at best.

So what should parents do?

Expect some changes and know what to look for. Talk with your child's guidance counselor to find out more about other pressures that may be arising in the school environment, and school-based solutions that may be under way. Take a close look at your child's academic progress during the past year. Is he or she maintaining good grades and solid study habits? If not, is it because of social/emotional issues or because of specific learning skills?

If you learn from teachers that your son or daughter is struggling, you need to take prompt action to shore up these deficiencies. Your child's teachers and guidance counselors should have a list of school or community-based options for supplemental instruction. Once your child is involved in these activities you need to use the same skills you apply to monitoring homework. Find out what types of assignments are involved and when they're supposed to be completed. Check with teachers on a weekly basis to determine if the extra work is translating to progress in the classroom.

Think about potential mentors for your child. While your son or daughter may suddenly be no fan of overt parental control, he or she may still value advice from other adults or responsible older youth. Ideally, this should be someone your child can talk to about emotional issues and someone who can reinforce your views about keeping on track academically regardless of the difficulties of this age. It's an added bonus if this individual has the time and ability to help with homework or special assignments that can help build skills and knowledge.

Find a productive, smart extracurricular activity. If your son or daughter is struggling academically, it may sound counterintuitive to look for another activity to fill the day. And yet the right activity could actually help your child become more academically



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motivated and self-assured. If your son is anxious about being too small to play football but loves to read, start your own at-home book club with rewards every time a book is completed. If your daughter's having trouble fitting in with the popular kids but designed her first Web page when she was 10, look for a technology club or other accelerated learning opportunity that can help her hone these skills and meet girls with similar abilities and remind her that there really is life after the 8th grade. While most children struggle some subjects, most have a natural aptitude for at least one. Activities like these can keep your child build a sense of self worth and smooth the way past the inevitable disappointments of this challenging period in his or her life.

In the meantime, take some deep breaths and try not to worry. With consistent assurance that your child is loved and ever-vigilant monitoring of the academic bottom line, you can both survive the "terrible tweens" older and wiser for the experience of getting through it together.

Dr. Raymond J. Huntington and Eileen Huntington are co-founders of Huntington Learning Center, which has helped children succeed in school for 30 years. For more information about how Huntington can help your child, visit [www.huntingtonlearning.com](http://www.huntingtonlearning.com) or call 1 800 CAN LEARN.

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