

# Middle Schoolers and the Big Growth Spurt

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Most often between fifth and ninth grades, children hit a major growth spurt. This growth spurt is different from the growth spurts of early childhood, because it tends to happen quickly, and at the end of it, students are very close to having their adult bodies. When a student will begin his/her growth spurt is determined by heredity and nutrition. Some students start their spurt as early as the fourth or fifth grade and finish during sixth or seventh grade. Some may not begin until they are in eighth or ninth grade. Most students start and finish during their middle school years. This difference of when a growth spurt for each student starts is the reason middle schoolers come in so many different sizes.

Children grow from their extremities inward, rather than from the torso out. In other words, their feet and hands grow first. Because the extremities grow first, mishaps sometimes occur. Middle schoolers may stumble or trip and/or have trouble picking up items laying on a table. The reason that they have difficulty picking up their feet or misjudging when picking up an object is their brains have not caught up with how much growth has occurred. Their depth perception is off.

While the body is growing, the “tween” brain is undergoing a growth spurt, too. The prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that helps us organize, plan, problem-solve and concentrate, goes through rapid maturation, and as the students proceed through the brain’s growth spurt, they sometimes do what is called “chaotic” thinking. They may become forgetful and/or less organized. They may have difficulty concentrating and completing school work.

Middle schoolers understand that something is different, but sometimes think that something is wrong with them. This realization may frighten or frustrate them, especially for students who needed little guidance to complete tasks or homework before the spurt began. Grown-ups are sometimes the target of a burst of frustration or anger and may hear the words, “But you don’t understand!” They are trying to see themselves as individuals away from their parents. They may establish boundaries to assert their independence. They judge what a normal middle schooler should be like by looking around at other middle schoolers, who are trying to figure out what it means to be an individual, too.

So, what can parents do to help their students work through this exciting, yet difficult time?

1. Remind yourselves that you were the same way when you were their age. (Trust me, we all went through this and we were not any more pleasant about it.)
2. Maintain the student’s daily routine and structure. Having a sense of what to expect each day is important to middle schoolers.
3. Share your experiences. At some point, you will have a special time with your middle schooler. He/she will want to have a parent close to soothe him/her, because of a difficult day. During that time, tell your middle schooler what your middle or junior high school experience was like. We all have memories of our younger selves when we were embarrassed or had thoughts that seemed silly. It is okay to share. They may say that your life was very different back then, but in the end, he/she will get the message, which is that he/she will come out of the middle school years and life will be better.