

Positive Paths for Young Adolescents

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It is possible for adults to make the middle level years a better time for young adolescents. We understand that it is during this time that children, desperate to find a place to belong, often make choices that negatively affect academic achievement and their ability to experience optimum health.

Creating a clear picture of what we want for our children helps us to guide them toward many chances for success. This picture might include:

- lifelong learning fostering intrinsic reward and increased economic potential;
- peaceful lives and enriching relationships;
- long high-quality lives that are free of substance abuse, early sexual activity, heart disease, osteoporosis or cancer.

Below are a series of suggestions that contribute to the picture above. These suggestions may also help you connect to other ways you are guiding your children to become academically and personally healthy.

Connect!

Children who are successful in school have a strong sense of connectedness. Connectedness means that the child derives satisfaction from people (family members or other adults) and/or organizations (clubs, teams, service groups) with whom they feel connected and valued.

One of the ways connections can be established and maintained between parents and children is by inviting children's participation in a parent's home fitness walking plan, regular bicycling schedule, or other activity which encourages conversation coupled with effort. This expands the opportunities to increase connectedness and communication that, for many parents, is often limited to "car time."

Connectedness is a primary factor in enabling children to move through their adolescent years without engaging in behaviors that can compromise academic or personal success. Parents should seek many opportunities for students to meaningfully connect with others through participation in community projects, events which include extended family and friends, as well as school or religious organizations.

Try!

In order for children to be competent learners they need to believe that they can learn and have a willingness to take risks and accept challenges in learning. Children who are good at learning keep trying even after they have failed a number of times. The idea, "...try, try again," can only be believed by children if they have had some success in trying again. Parents who help children see options help them reach the conclusion that they are capable learners.

Participation in a variety of recreational activities or in work with others on specific projects provides a supportive environment in which to experience failure and success. By initiating involvement, parents enable this learning to take place.

In addition to their own success, children need to have observed others "try, try again" and finally succeed. When children observe labor to master a physical skill, solve a problem, or work toward a goal, they learn the value of effort.

Move!

Young adolescent years are typified by many stressors which interfere with their ability to focus on learning. Physical activity is linked to mental health and learning by reducing conditions that interfere with learning.

The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Research Digest reported the following connections between exercise and mental health:

Physical activity can:

- reduce anxiety
- reduce depression
- bolster self-esteem
- encourage restful sleep
- increase one's ability to respond to stress

The short-term benefits of physical activity may also include learning to form close and durable relationships, developing an increased sense of belonging, respecting others and oneself, taking responsibility, and gaining self-confidence in one's capabilities ("try, try again!").

Participation in recreational activities may also impart the personal value that physical activity is important in one's life. Consistent participation in regular physical activity does contribute a measure of prevention against developing chronic debilitating diseases as adults. Good habits generally reflect values that are established early in life.

We know that values are caught, not taught. Children observe adult behavior and formulate ideas about what the adult values. If you wish your children to value physical activity, let them see you:

- walk rather than ride when possible;
- park farther away from the store or office for a short walk to and from the car;
- get off the bus or train one stop earlier for a short walk to the office, store, or home;
- climb stairs rather than take the elevator or escalator.

The benefits of physical activity coupled with the connectedness and practice associated with recreational activities provides a positive impetus for parent/child involvement.

Conclusion

Healthful and positive development of young people is a complex process. If implemented, these suggestions provide children with significant opportunities for positive decision-making and a formula for optimum health. With parental advocacy and support, they can assist children in making their middle school years a time to remember with fondness.

Resources

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3. CDC's Guidelines for School and Community Programs: Promoting Lifelong Physical Activity. At-A-Glance. US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease prevention and Health Promotion. March, 1997. Atlanta, GA.
4. President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Research Digest. Series 2, No. 12. December, 1997.
5. Prothrow-Stith, Deborah, and Sher Quaday. Hidden Causalities: The Relationship Between Violence and Learning. Shelly Gehshan, Ed. Washington, DC: National Health and Education Consortium. 1995

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