8 NEW Characteristics of Middle School Kids: What Can We Do?

By: *Jack Berckemeyer*

As an educator, do you ever feel like you might be at a point in your career where you're like the old person sitting on the front porch complaining about people walking across their lawn? Have you started saying things like: "These kids today!" or, "When I was a teenager … ?"

Some argue that the Covid experience led to considerable changes in our middle school students. We can't deny that the pandemic, with its shutdowns, isolation, changes in school programs, lost employment, stresses to families, and global uncertainties, affected society in multiple ways. So, was it the pandemic that affected our kids and how they function at school? Or were they already changing, and we just failed to notice the changes until *after* the pandemic?

Regardless of when the trends began, we are noticing some rather dramatic changes in how students—and society more broadly—treat themselves and others. As I travel across the country working with middle school educators and students, I hear the same observations: Young adolescent students have become more vocal and less compliant. At times, they're refusing to work or just "checking out" even while physically present in class. Apathy, absences, and tardies are at an all-time high. Simple tasks have become battles, and our students seem to have lost their ability to "do" school effectively. All of these have become major frustrations for teachers and administrators and major worries for parents. (And by the way, a slew of new research confirms what educators are observing.)

Now—we can complain, fester, vent, and worry. Or we can explore the changes and attributes of the new emerging adolescent. We can try to get to the root causes of some new behaviors and understand the challenges and traumas our students face in today's world. We can identify the patterns and help our students in this transition toward routine and stability (even if we have to redefine those terms a bit).

Here are some of the **new (or perhaps intensified) characteristics** I see emerging in young adolescents. Let's look at each and then consider some ways we might respond.

Characteristic 1: Struggle with Basic School 101 Expectations

Are you noticing how a simple request can lead to a battle with some students? Are you seeing shorter attention spans and more resistance to sitting for extended periods of time? Are you begging for just (please!) seven minutes of uninterrupted instruction? And have your students forgotten the basic protocols of school?

Remember that the past few years have led to a lack of structure for many students and families. They had many months to reprogram to a less regulated life while school was disrupted, and many of those patterns have held. So now, students carry that lack of structure back into the school halls, playgrounds, lunchrooms, and classrooms where they might feel the need to run to lunch, walk out of class before the bell, and question why they can't use the restroom whenever they want to.

Some responses to consider:

- Instead of complaining, "I can't believe our kids don't know how to . . . (fill-in the blank)," it's time to slow our roll and teach it. Yes, there is pressure to close the achievement gap. However, there is also a need for our students to know why we walk on the right side of hallways, how to remember and follow the basic behaviors of school, how we treat each other with respect, how we listen, and how to be a good person. If our middle school students have forgotten how to do school effectively, we must stop and reteach those skills. We can't assume that they remember the procedures—even a few years after schools are re-opened.
- Start from scratch. Demonstrate the expected behaviors and routines. Practice them. Model them yourself. Don't expect students to do something that has not been thoroughly explained. In addition to daily practice, there are three perfect times a year for a targeted reintroduction and review of classroom procedures: the beginning of the year, after winter holiday break, and after spring break. Students need the safety of consistency and reminders.
- Don't try to force the young adolescents into structure. Consider that maybe there has been too much. Be sure to change up activities and add more movement. This change in the students forces **us** to be more innovative and to make learning more active and engaging. And that's a good thing. Fuel their dopamine (the feel-good, energy- enlivening hormone) earlier in the day. Gone are the days when we can afford to be glad that kids were lethargic and quiet during the first period or two of the day!

Characteristic 2: Apathy, Disengagement, Disconnection

Yes, I might miss the old days when I handed out a worksheet and not one of my students flat-out refused to do it – even if they filled in the typed letter e's and doodled off to the side of the paper. But back then, students were not likely to confront us about "blowing off" the work. It was more of a passive defiance. Now, before we even mention a task or assignment, several students might say, "I am not doing this." or "This is useless; why would I waste my time!"

Are we taking on all the responsibility for students' work and leaving none of it to them? After they tell us they are not going to do the assignment—do we then try to encourage them, explain about the value of work and the importance of grades, and about the harms of falling behind? And after each effort we make, do they respond with something like: "I don't care!" Well, the truth is, they don't care.

Does it seem harder than ever to engage students and keep them engaged—or even inspire them to care? Are there way too many kids who seem "checked out?" Many teachers and schools are seeing patterns of more detachment and less engagement—with academics, nonacademic activities, socialization, and general school connection or participation.

What is this about? Is it due to a lack of interest, or is it a cry for help? Is this a pattern instigated by the pandemic disruption in schools' and society's schedules and expectations? Or perhaps, do the students believe that, in middle school, there are just no serious repercussions to their decision not to work or get seriously involved in their own learning? Have their brains just turned off—or have they been reprogrammed only to tune into their smartphones and video games?

Some responses to consider:

- Remember that many students had months of detachment. They lost connection to their peers, to adults, and to themselves as students. **We need to enlist them in their own re-attachment and re-energizing.** It might be time to create a "Right of Refusal" form that the students fill out when they refuse to do the required assignment. On this form, they would have the chance to give reasons why they are not completing the assignment along with an explanation of how they can make up credit for this activity. **Let them plan the path to completing their work.** This hands the reins over to them—basically forcing their engagement! Instead of sharing with parents that their child is not working, it might be helpful to have the 25 "Right of Refusal" forms with the work attached for the parents to see why their child is not doing well.
- Pull students into responsibility for their work and work habits. Consider creating a form to be used when students do not use their time wisely in class. This can be used as an "exit ticket" that must be turned in before they leave class. It's a requirement for them to explain what distracted them from completing the assignment during class time. (This is also an opportunity for students' self-awareness and a chance for the teacher to get to know what's going on with a particular student.)
- Look for more ways to restore schoolwork ownership to the students. For example, if you have an advisory time, students could be required to send home (via email) a description of what they are missing along with their plan for how they can make up that assignment.
- Some of our students seem to have forgotten how to socialize. They are still somewhat out of practice at face-to-face connections. Some of them are lonely. We can combat disengagement with more inviting, active learning experiences. We can counter disconnection with more social contacts and group learning as part of their academics.

Remember that their past few years have been sedentary. We need to get them out of their seats and moving to learn.

Characteristic 3: Increased Absenteeism

Do you have students who are out for 15 days in just the first quarter? Some students might come to school for a day—then be gone for 5, back for 2 and out for 7. This pattern exists in middle schools all over the country. In fact, students not attending school is a huge issue (especially at the middle school and high school levels) across this country. The numbers are worse for high poverty schools. In some schools, a third or more of the student body is chronically absent (10% of the year or more).

Even as schools are beginning to catch up with graduation rates and academic recovery, absenteeism is still a problem three years since the pandemic shattered attendance. And, as we know well, chronic absence contributes to declines in academic performance. Plain and simple: If kids don't come to school, they fall behind or even drop out.

Some responses to consider:

- Start by remembering that many kids had a year and a half or more of not having to go to school at all or of going for shortened days. Their brains need to be re-wired to the idea that school matters. Perhaps we could gather data on students with the greatest number of missing assignments and create a plan for each kid. Having a student going from class to class when they come back will never get that child caught up. In fact, when a student does return to class, they are unlikely to be able to do the current work because they are behind.
- So, let's have plans ready for how to get them back on track. Each grade level or team should have a plan for the day that child returns. For example, the student could go to social studies for four periods to get caught up and still attend their electives or essentials classes in the other periods. The goal is to help acclimate them back into school so they will not feel completely overwhelmed.
- In addition, we can gather individual data. We must get at the root causes that keep kids from school. Not every chronically absent student misses school for the same reasons. Increased mental health concerns cause some parents to avoid forcing kids to go to school if they're feeling down or uncomfortable while there. We must dig deep to identify individual reasons and plan to address the emotional, psychological, and social matters—as well as transportation challenges and academic catch-up needs.
- We can step up our emphasis on building relationships and boosting kids' sense of belonging. And we can step up connections with individual families. To be eager to come to school, each kid needs to feel safe, welcomed, and supported at school.

Characteristic 4: Dehumanization of Authority Figures and Disrespect for Property

Have you noticed a decline in how your students treat an SRO officer, principal, teacher, volunteers, and possibly their fellow students? Are their filters off? Have more kids said things that are offensive, disruptive, rude, and, at times, cruel? Have they taken to calling you "Bro" instead of your name? Do you feel at times that they look at you and other staff members as equals or even "less than" themselves?

Have you seen or heard of behaviors (inspired by online challenges or spread by social media platforms) proposing destruction of school property? Have you seen the media posts and threads where students make fun of a teacher or other school employees and then post it for the world to see? Is there a level of disrespect emerging in your classroom or school, and you're baffled– wondering how and why it got so intense?

Many schools and teachers are encountering a trend of rising tempers, increased misbehavior, vandalism, violence, and general detachment from the human connection. School surveys and other research confirm a rise in incidents of all these forms of threats and behaviors at school. This includes acts of disrespect toward school staff members and other students. The increasing wave of violence and trauma especially affects teen girls, LGBTQ+ youth, and students of various religious faiths.

Some responses to consider:

- How do we get back to making sure we are treating each other with respect and humanizing each other? Begin with something as simple as making sure students use your last name. When a student comes into class "hot" or arrogant and starts with, "Hey you, Bro…," you may need to slow your roll and say, "It starts with Hello, Mr. Berckemeyer." (I know you're thinking that's not **your** last name. However, you understand the request!) Asking our students to use our full name induces them to slow down and formalize their interaction with us. Great teachers make great attempts to know their students' names. Our students can do the same. Now, if they refuse to use our last name after several requests, maybe we walk away from that situation. We can let them know that when they are ready to address each other properly, we can continue. If we cave and let them disrespect us, then our students know they can get whatever they want without treating us like human beings trying to help each other out.

- By the way, research shows that one of the most effective ways to humanize the school day, build person-to-person respect and particularly teacher-student respect, and to increase a sense of belonging for students, is this simple act: Greet every student at the door by name **every time** they enter your classroom. Say goodbye the same way. Look at each one with a welcoming smile and a quick personal comment if possible. The teacher-student relationship is still one of the most powerful factors in promoting respectful and kind behavior.
- Regarding school vandalism: Some schools are finding success in addressing this by inviting students to take part in decorating bathrooms, hallways, and other areas of the school to help them take ownership of their environment. Kids are less likely to deface something they have contributed to creating.

Characteristic 5: Inclination and Ability to Debate Bad Behavior

Recently while working with a group of sixth-grade teachers, a group of their students came running down the hall. The most veteran teacher got so mad she did what any teacher would want do: she opened the door and hollered, "Why are you running?!" Immediately, a student fired back, "We're increasing our fitness; now leave us alone."

Have you asked a student to sit down during class and received an answer something like this: "It's my civil liberty to stand up"? Teachers are noticing that their middle school students seem to respond to simple requests and statements these days with confident and sometimes complex arguments. Has everything become a debate? And have you noticed how clever and articulate students have become at quick-response reasons and comebacks?

Some responses to consider:

- Some school officials, teachers, and teams are having success in avoiding debates and negotiations with students who are not following building expectations with this tactic: They use common, pre-planned responses to such an incident. Try using such phrases as, "We don't run in our school." And, "In our class, we sit in our seats." By keeping it simple and referring to the reasonable protocols for "doing" school, we send messages to our students that we have common expectations within the building.
- Avoid asking questions about their behavior—particularly "Why?" questions. Just offer the straightforward statement of the appropriate behavior—thus not opening any doors to arguments. Don't get into negotiations.

Characteristic 6: Pack Mentality, Along with Human Threading

Have you ever asked a student to put away a phone or expressed a simple command or reminder, only to have **other** students chime in with their "two cents worth?" The other student's input might be an argument in defense of the student's right to use their phone at this moment. Another student might speak up to point out some vague part of the cell phone policy that bypasses the usual rule in this case. The next voice may remind you that **you** were just on **your** phone and that you're not special. Do you see how quickly it can escalate?

When students feed off each other in the classrooms by making comments, one right after the other—it's like a social media thread. If I start a comment in class and other students respond with the same tenor and tone, it is the same as getting a virtual "Like." Our students have taken the aspects of social media threading and are now doing what I call human threading: feeding off each other's messages but doing it out loud, in-person—not hidden behind a social media post.

In the same vein, a student might start a digital thread with a post such as, "I had a bad day at school!" (or "Math class was a waste of time.") The next response might be, "I also had a bad day" (or "I didn't understand any of the math.") And the next response could be, "It was the worst day. I am feeling depressed and anxious."

(or "I give up on this math. I'm hopeless at geometry.") This starts and perpetuates a downward spiral of defeat and negativity—with each following post affirming the previous ones.

Do your students use the pack mentality tactic toward other students or a teacher trying to enforce a rule or policy? "Dang, Mr. Berckemeyer, the other teacher lets us wear our earbuds. Why are you being a jerk?" And the next kid chimes in, "Listening to music while we work reduces stress. Don't you know that!" And the next one adds, "My parents say it's okay for me to wear these while I work." Not so long ago, maybe one kid would confront you on one of your comments or actions. Now it might be multiple kids. This presents the unique (or unique to recent times) situation where several kids defy you at once—thus making it very hard for the teacher to turn things around or stop the barrage of resistance. Have they finally figured that they outnumber us?

Some responses to consider:

- Interrupt the focus on the student who was originally asked to comply with your request. Talking with the other students who interrupt gives them the power that they are seeking and lets the initial encounter mushroom into a mess. Follow your management plan. The expectations and boundaries have already been set for interruptions or disrespect. Hold to the already-taught expectations and move on.
- Stay calm; don't take comments personally. We are not paid by the word—so keep your responses short and to the point.
- Once the class settles down, or at the end of class, you can connect with the other students and let them know it is not their responsibility to reprimand you as the

Characteristic 7: Expanding Voice and Self Advocacy

Are you seeing more students speak up in self-protection (or protection of the group) when other students are disruptive? Granted, they may not choose the politest terms when trying to get another student to simmer down. As the teacher you might dislike the tactic but are thankful for their support. And do you find that students are speaking up more in defense of others being harassed? Or more freely stating their ideas and observations?

The impulse to justify bad behavior (Characteristic 5) and to hop on the human thread of challenging rules or spreading antagonism or despair (Characteristic 6)—are both facets of a new young adolescent attribute that also has a positive side to it. For several years now, our students have been aware of and affected by social-emotional learning. In addition, they spend their lives gobbling up information and examples online—so they are full of knowledge and surrounded with models of how to speak their ideas and viewpoints.

Yes, not all of the models are those we would choose. But the point is: many young adolescents know a lot, think deeply, are innovative, are aware of injustices, and have good insights. They are speaking up more for themselves and others. They know they can access information quickly and without teacher support. They are voicing their opinions on what they want to learn and how they want to learn. Though this can cause conflicts when we have pre-set curriculum that it is not so much student-focused as it is focused on alignment with state standards—it is what should be happening at this stage in their schooling. They are desperately seeking to be part of the learning process, not just the assignments process.

Some responses to consider:

- Students' burgeoning ability and courage to share their voices is a good thing. We can do much to direct this growth in a positive direction. First, we can encourage and honor students' knowledge, insights, identities, and opinions. We can offer many and varied opportunities for students to participate in their own learning in real ways that matter. We can listen to their ideas. We can take their wisdom and suggestions seriously.
- While we can embrace their voices and work to strengthen them, we can remember (from the above characteristics) that many of our young adolescents are still on the road back to some of the basic self-

management processes and skills of civility and social interaction. When we teach students tools for expressing their voices in positive and effective ways, and when we give strong feedback to productive use of their voices—we make great strides toward rebuilding and expanding these personal and social skills. We can do this by asking them for input on specific, meaningful classroom procedures and projects. Student-led conferences, for example, empower students by offering opportunities for them to put their accomplishments and challenges into words and to take responsibility for their own learning and growth.

Characteristic 8: Inability to Handle Mixed Messages

"Other teachers let us do it!" "My mom said I did not have to do that assignment." "I don't have to listen to you!" "Other schools in this country don't have such a dumb dress code!" "The internet says it's okay to do the problems this way." You might hear each of these comments (or others like them) all by the end of first period. One of the cruelest things we do to young adolescents is give them mixed messages, comments, commands, and demands.

Middle level research has always pointed out that the one thing young adolescents crave, **and** the one thing we don't provide well, is *consistency*. It's not that we are not aware of this. It's not that we don't intend to be consistent. It's just that it is tough to consistently be consistent! But when each student interacts with several adults in a school day, plus parents or caretakers at home, that one kid can be bombarded with a slew of different messages. The middle schooler's developing brain just can't sort through and manage them all. And it's not fair to ask them to.

Now, this may not look like a characteristic of the "new young adolescent." Consistency has always been important. Middle schoolers have always been flustered by mixed messages. But remember that today's young adolescent has a mega-world of messages on just about every topic and behavior possible—through their smartphones and other devices. They are exposed to multiple models of policies and procedures and of what's okay or not okay to do. In their world of infinite suggestions, we must be **even more clear and consistent with what we mean and what we expect**—in this class or school.

Some responses to consider:

- For years, we have created student handbooks in which expectations are outlined for teachers and students. Yet, we have had educators who have not followed those expectations. So, instead, let's try another approach: Start with what you do in your classroom regarding non-negotiable procedures and expectations and then work with your team members or grade level to combine your team or grade level non-negotiables. Consistency works when you deal with what you can control within the school. One thing you can control is the expectations across the team or grade level. But then you must hold to them yourself and hold students to them! This is easier if you have a limited list; that's why I suggest starting with 3 to 5 non-negotiables. In addition, you must **teach** students what each expectation or procedure means and how it looks. Find time for students to discuss and demonstrate expectations—time for instructional routines and for non-academic processes of classroom life together. Practice these—not just at the beginning of the year, but all the time.

- Apply expectations equally to all persons. Mixed messages are not just about how you hold to a procedure for late work. They are about how you communicate the requirements and consequences to individuals on a given procedure.
- At all times, watch what you say and how you say it. Don't say one thing and then do another. Or say one thing and mean something else. Don't communicate nonverbally something different than what your words say. Students will pick up on mixed messages and they'll be confused. Mixed messages lead to anxiety and disengagement.

- If you are on a team or in a grade-level group that has common expectations—but **you** are the person who deviates from the non-negotiable, know that you not only send mixed messages and confusion to students, but you also pit one teacher (yourself) against other teachers. For the other teachers who try to follow the rule, this leads to stress and burnout—and in some cases, they just give up.

Addressing any one of these eight new characteristics enhances your work with the others.

You may notice some common themes threading through my suggested responses to what we're seeing as new attributes and behaviors. These are such themes as:

- re-teaching of fundamental routines and civil behavior;
- re-engagement; strengthening community;
- deepening trusting relationships between students and teachers;
- restoring healthy socialization; boosting students 'ownership of and accountability for their schoolwork and their behavior; and
- empowering students for positive contributions.

Such responses honor young adolescents in their particular developmental stage and show students that we believe in them. At the same time, the strategies help us re-train them in the basics of "doing" school and of interacting with one another—basics that are imperative for the safety of the students and staff in any school. These are foundational steps in restorative practices and responses to trauma and change. We must start there. Then we can nurture and expand these in more complexity with a gradual and appropriate increase in students 'power and responsibility.

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