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## Friendship-The Middle School Years

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In my 13 years in education, nine of those years have been spent working with middle school students directly as either a teacher, school counselor, or administrator. In all of my conversations with parents over the years, I am still waiting on the first one where a parent tells me that *their* middle school years were their favorite season of schooling. Parents will speak fondly of elementary school and share about some of their favorite teachers from those formative years; or they will share how much they enjoyed high school and getting to play varsity sports, acting in the high school musical, getting their driver's license, and overall becoming more comfortable with the person God had created them to be. As I look back on my own schooling experience, I would have to agree that I think of elementary school with fondness and I also loved my time in high school. My undergraduate years in college were even more fun than high school, however, I would not wish on my worst enemy to have to go back and relive the middle school years. Those were a tough couple of years. There is no one thing that makes middle school difficult, but as I am sure you know by now the peer-to-peer dynamics change drastically once students transition from lower school to middle school and it can be difficult. I would like to share a few thoughts that I hope will give you encouragement and hope. These are a few tips I have picked up over almost a decade of working with middle school families.

As you are talking with your middle school student about friendship, it is important to remind them that it is OK and healthy to have different types of friends. Some friends will be good at making you laugh and bring energy and fun to any gathering. However, that same friend that makes you laugh might not be the best at keeping secrets or giving you good Godly counsel when you need it. On the other hand, there might be a friend that always has a listening ear and sound advice, but they might not be the friend you would show up with to the end of the year class party. Students need to know that not every friend they have will fill every need for them. Every student has different strengths and it is important our students realize that and appreciate them for their strengths instead of tearing them down for their weaknesses.

As your students move into middle school, lengthy and meaningful conversations can seem increasingly rare, so it is important to take advantage of the ones the Lord does provide. Use those opportunities to talk with your student about what is important to them in a friend. It is so easy to want to be friends with the most popular group of students in your grade, but that group may not have learned the qualities of being a good friend. Share with your student why honesty, trustworthiness, loyalty, and humility are all great qualities to have in a friend. Point out real life examples that you come across in the news on how a person who is deficient in these areas can end up being hurtful. It is also important to turn the question around and ask your own child what qualities of being a great friend he/she think they possess. Self-reflection and self-awareness are important qualities for young people. In the Bible, Solomon, one of the wisest men to ever walk the Earth, stated in Proverbs 18:24, "A man who has friends must himself be friendly..." (NKJV). We all must continue to grow in the qualities that will attract good, quality friends.

Finally, one thing I am sure to bring up in every new student interview I do is to encourage new students to get involved in some kind of after school activity. There is no quicker way to build friendships than to be around people who have similar interests. If your student feels like they have hit a rut with their friendships, encourage them to find something new to do. Maybe they need to try a sport they have never played before or audition for a part in the school play. That can put them in a group of people outside their normal friend group thus increasing their sphere of influence, which is important at this age. It is important to remind your student that by doing this it doesn't mean they lose their other friends, but rather the potential to gain new ones, which is the point of doing something new and different.

These tips will not solve all the friendship issues, but I do believe these tips work to find true friendships that will last the test of time. The most important thing you can continue to do is constantly remind your middle schooler that they are wonderfully made by a Creator that has a specific purpose for them. Part of that purpose is to be a life altering friend to a classmate. It is easy to lose sight of that truth on the darkest days of middle school, but as somebody who has survived the middle school years, it is important to remind them that it does get better.