

Middle School Parent Forum
Tuesday, May 6, 2020
With
Roxanne Leff, Head of Middle School
Dr. Kathy Reiss, School Psychologist

Remote Learning Right Now

Roxanne: I want to start off by naming that we are trying to learn and teach during a worldwide crisis. None of us is spared from the impact of this time, though we may be experiencing it to different degrees. We are all doing our best to keep our students/children learning, calm, and happy. Our goals as a school are for students and families, teachers to feel safe, connected, and supported.

Developmental Milestones for Middle School Children

Kathy: I will talk about typical development for 7th and 8th grade children and then look at how our current circumstances might be impacting development right now. Children at this age can be more self-conscious - they worry about how they look, acne, body changes. They may worry their own physical changes are happening too early or too late.

While this self-consciousness is typical for this age group, it is now possibly exacerbated by Zooming. For the first time they not only see their classmates and teachers as they would in an actual classroom, but they see themselves as well on Zoom, where there is a lot of opportunity for comparison.

Children this age need their peer group more and more - it's one of the ways that adolescents can move successfully from being in their nuclear family to developing more appropriate independence - they move to their new family of peers (this takes years, but they're on their way). Remote learning has changed those peer connections - they're still vital and hopefully still happening, but now it's more likely that misunderstandings between friends can occur because body language and nuance are missing when we're not with each other in person. That sense of disconnection can cause sadness, and in some cases, depression. When we think of how much 7th and 8th graders like to sit literally piled on top of one another at school, this physical distance causes a real loss.

When I think about helping middle schoolers develop an appropriate level of independence, I realize that getting there needs to look different at this point - we are not automatically allowing our children to wander around as much by themselves, or in a group, because of needing to shelter in place. How can you help give your children needed and appropriate independence in a safe way?

- Chores: the more they are for the family the better (great to make their beds, for example, but if they can help cook, do laundry, work to support others in their home, this will help. Middle schoolers want to feel needed and important)
- Care for younger children or pets
- Allow them to set their own boundaries and not always participate in family activities if they want space, but don't let them go so far away physically or psychically that you never see them! It's fair and appropriate to figure out with them what your expectations are for family togetherness, even if they want less. They may appreciate being part of the process of figuring out a compromise that works for all of you (and revisit the plan to see if it's still working).

Children can be moodier now - one of my favorite books called *How to Hug a Porcupine* by Julie Ross underscores how many hormonal changes are happening under the surface for children at this time (she thinks that kids should have a button on their foreheads that glows every time there's a hormonal surge so we can be prepared!) - and how they can suddenly seem to change - emotions are in flux, and can seem extreme at this time - this is normal. It helps children (over time) learn to regulate their feelings. Not only negatives, but also joy. At this developmental point it can be confusing for both kids and parents. Your children may scream at you to leave them alone and then come search you out a few minutes later as they need that contact. Life with a middle schooler is like living on a Rollercoaster! And that's without having to switch to remote learning!

What is remote learning?

Roxanne: Two-thirds of the way during the school year, we had to close our physical school, in order to shelter in place. We have to work and go to school from home. Students and teachers had to learn how to be online. A lot. We implemented Zoom as a primary platform, we recently eliminated the blogs and are using google classroom for assignments.

Grounded in our Montessori philosophy, we are constantly thinking about our students' needs--to be social, connect with their teachers, and engage in meaningful learning. We

looked at our current schedule, and shortened the times of classes and shortened their lengths and included numerous breaks during the day. Best practice says that you cannot just run a full day online. We have hit a good stride with the middle school week overall.

Teachers have tried to balance synchronous and asynchronous learning. Many classes include a short lesson at the beginning and then students can go and work on their own, with a teacher on zoom in case there is a question. **Work is due by 5:00pm each day.** Students can join teachers during office hours--some go on their own, others attend with a little nudging. We hope that this provides flexibility and support for students during the day. It allows for students to rest, read, and take up a new interest if they find themselves with more time.

The teachers devised ways to connect with students using virtual means by playing games, scavenger hunts, and last week we saw a return of reading buddies.

At the end of this time, students will be ready for the next grade. Whether they are returning to BHMS next year or moving onto high school, each setting will meet students where they are and move forward from there. At BHMS, new work is being assigned - debates, research on the constitution, looking at COVID-19 related data and analyzing it, probability, quadratic equations, art history, independent reading, writing essays using TQEL, and the Shakespeare production is in full swing. Feedback is being given and received, the loop rolls on.

We have surmised that learning and teaching takes longer. It's challenging to absorb new information during a crisis. Giving feedback on student work is taking longer. We have needed to slow down. Students and teachers need time to process what is received virtually, especially given the circumstances.

Loss and Grieving

Kathy: We are all recognizing moments of loss - hopefully not of people we love succumbing to the virus, but we have to remember that other losses are real and impactful nonetheless. The loss of free time with friends, the loss of connection to other adults in their lives, other adults in the school building, other students, rituals... we are working hard to hold on to as many rituals as we can (maybe making new ones) to help alleviate this for your children (and for us, to be honest). Allow you kids to talk about what's on their minds when they're open to it (or suggest a journal as a way to put their thoughts and worries somewhere safe).

Sleep

Students are talking about falling asleep later and feeling tired - part of this is the possible lack of exercise during the day and the stress underlying our lives right now, which can cause fitful sleep. Please pay attention to helping them get back on track. For example, ask them to cut out screen time about an hour before bed (taking phones out of their rooms will help them not hear the notifications). Make time for exercise.

Looking ahead to the end of the year

Roxanne: Now that we have clarity about not returning to school for the remainder of the year, we can finalize plans to close out the year in the most meaningful way possible. One thing that I have heard, and this is for 8th grade families, when folks go through harrowing situations they are bonded together in a way that is different than if things were “normal”. So I hold that as we think about how to end the year for our students.

Grading

We plan to roll out our plans for communicating student progress during remote learning in the next week or so. Just know that we are taking notes on how students are managing during this time. We will highlight their successes and support any struggles that may arise. The goal is not to penalize students during this time. And, we expect students to complete assignments as best as they can. Many schools are rethinking grading at this time and we are too.

High school process

We have been staying up to date with the changes in the high school process for next year. Independent high schools and the DOE are rethinking criteria for admission into school and we await more information from them. We will share what we know during our May 21st meeting.

After the May meeting we will start meeting with each family to make high school lists. We have typically recommended testing refreshers in the fall, that recommendation still stands. Some independent schools have gone testing optional and the public schools will not have testing as part of their profile since DOE testing was canceled. In the event that you decide to have your child sit for an ISEE, ERB has rolled out a plan for students to take the test at home and I can share more about that during our may meeting.

If you are planning to apply to independent school, set up your Ravenna account, it will allow you to sign up for open houses at schools.

Trip

Since students are not going on an end-of-year trip, the 8th graders who were planning the trip to DC have turned their attention to what they can do to have fun, build community, and spend the money that they raised for the trip. Those plans are forthcoming too.

Graduation

Two weeks ago, I met with the 8th graders to hear their ideas. I have some too. A number of 8th graders have agreed to join me and some middle school teachers to finalize the plans. Given the importance of graduation for them and how different it will be, I think it is important to center 8th grade voices at this time. Stay tuned for more information.