

Planet MIDDLE SCHOOL

Helping Your Child through
the Peer Pressure, Awkward
Moments & Emotional Drama

Dr. Kevin
Leman



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Dr. Kevin Leman, Planet Middle School
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To my grandchildren,
Conner and Adeline:
“I love you to the moon and back.”

And to the parents of middle-schoolers:
Enjoy the ride.

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Introduction

You've Just Arrived on Planet Middle School

They're up, they're down, they're floating in the stratosphere.
But you can make these weird years the best and most fun
age of all.

Have you ever wondered if someone left the door open in your house and let an alien into your family room? Suddenly that sweet son who picked a dandelion from your yard and presented it to you like a prize rose, and that precious daughter who snuggled by your side on the sofa and told you all the secrets of her heart, have morphed into middle-schoolers you can't recognize—complete with smart mouths and self-centered attitudes.

Just tell any mom on the playground that you have a child about to enter middle school, and you'll get a cluck of empathy. "Oh, you have one of *those*. Well, you'll get through it," she'll say and pat your hand in sympathy. To quote Sande, my dear wife, who has

weathered (and enjoyed) raising four girls and a boy, “Preadolescent and adolescent girls are the worst creatures walking the planet.”

Middle-school boys can be mean and are often clueless. Middle-school girls can be even meaner, not to mention catty as all get-out too. One glimpse of two preadolescent girls going at each other will send all but the toughest of men running for cover.

Entering middle school is like stepping onto a different planet for both you and your child—a time and an expanding universe where peer pressure, society, media, and technology influences, as well as hormone changes, can create havoc in your child’s life and in your relationship. Your home environment can sometimes

Your home environment
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planet about to
spontaneously combust.

feel more like a red-hot planet about to spontaneously combust, especially if you have two middle-schoolers of the same gender cohabiting the same space. Solar flares of emotions are an everyday drama, and the sudden flashes can be blinding.

These “expanding universe” years—ages 11 through 13—are when your child will do almost *anything* to fit in . . . yes, even if you’ve taught him to do otherwise and you’re certain he knows better. With hormones swirling and body parts changing, all middle-schoolers are at risk for behaviors you wouldn’t recognize as belonging to your son or daughter. Add together these influences:

- the continual bombardment flowing through their iPods, cell phones, and tablets;
- the interactions with their peers on a daily basis;
- the many schools that now use electronic textbooks; devices such as Chromebooks for assignments, tests, and research; and their own email systems;

- the popularity of Facebook and Twitter accounts, not to mention other social media; and
- the media messages of movies, YouTube videos and songs, and computer games;

and it's no wonder today's middle-schoolers are growing up faster than ever before.

What you can't change are those ever-present facts of life. But you can learn to be smart about them. The middle-school years don't have to create chaos in your family. Whether you're smack in the middle of them or nervously anticipating them, you can navigate the meteor-strewn universe with confidence and a steady hand. With a little knowledge and some key principles, you can steer your middle-schooler toward lifelong success.

Planet Middle School will help you

- understand your middle-schooler and her rapidly expanding universe;
- respond but not react to the solar-flare dramas (and keep your sense of humor);
- naturally model the single most important character quality of all—an attitude of gratitude;
- relate to his survival-of-the-fittest struggles every day;
- identify signs of at-risk behavior;
- grapple with the black hole of technology—a fact of life—that sucks your child in;
- learn how to safeguard your child in the midst of the swirling morass of information and online predators;

These “expanding universe” years—ages 11 through 13—are when your child will do almost *anything* to fit in . . . yes, even if you've taught him to do otherwise and you're certain he knows better.

- teach your child the basics of sex (before someone else tells them their version) and why respect for themselves and others is so critical to their long-term physical and emotional health;
- talk in ways your middle-schooler will hear;
- harness the power of positive parental expectations in your relationship with your child;
- create an environment that keeps your child happily saying, “There’s no place like home” (even if it’s not to your face);
- encourage your child in his unique bent without being pushy;
- foster opportunities to broaden your child’s world from “all about me” to “the importance of we.”

Yes, your middle-schooler will still be weird at times. No doubt about it. But armed with the insight and practical principles of this book, you can make the middle-school years the best and most fun age of all. Someday, in fact, you and your grown-up kids will be sitting around the dinner table, laughing and swapping stories about these memorable years. Just like my beloved bride, Sande, and I do with our five children now.

I guarantee it.

1

Creature from the Black Lagoon

There's a new creature in your family room . . . that used to be your kid. Why your home and relationship can sometimes feel like a sci-fi flick, and what you can do to ease the transition.

“Not since the beginning of time has the world known terror like this! . . . Shocking and suspenseful,” says the trailer for the classic 1950s sci-fi adventure *Creature from the Black Lagoon*.¹ In this monster film, fossil hunters travel down a dark, mist-shrouded river and enter the domain of a prehistoric, one-of-a-kind creature. But capturing the creature only kicks off the nonstop action, especially when the creature surprises them all, doing what they never could have expected, and creates an atmosphere of terror and chaos. “Out of the murk and mystery . . . up from the depths of unknown waters comes a creature to confound science and terrorize the world!”²

Does the creature from the black lagoon sound a little like your middle-schooler . . . on a good day? Does he or she sometimes create chaos in your home and confound your reasoning ability?

It seems only yesterday your 11-year-old son was eager to please you. “Would you mind bringing in the trash can from the street?” you asked.

“Sure, Mom.” He flashed you a smile. “Could you drop me off at Sam’s afterward so we can shoot some hoops?”

Now, when he emerges from his bedroom lair before school, even asking him, “Are you ready to go yet?” sets off a major tirade.

“Go? Do I look like I’m ready to go?” he spouts defiantly in your face. Then he stalks off toward the bathroom, muttering about how stupid parents are in general—and you in particular.

For extra drama, he gives the hallway wall a little kick.

Your thoughts whirl.
So I suddenly got stupid overnight? Well, that was fast. And what was that outburst about, anyway? All I asked was . . .

Your thoughts whirl. *So I suddenly got stupid overnight? Well, that was fast. And what was that outburst about, anyway? All I asked was . . .*

And what about your daughter, your 12-year-old who told you last summer, “Mom, I love spending time with you”?

Now when you ask her, “Hey, honey, want to go to the grocery store with me?” she simply stares at you. No, not stares

exactly. She rolls her eyes and announces, “Like *that* is exciting.” Without another word, she starts texting like a mad woodpecker on her blingy hot-pink cell phone and flounces off to her bedroom. You hear the door close with more oomph than you’re comfortable with.

After each of those encounters, you stand shell-shocked in the kitchen. *Who opened the door to our house and let in that sassy-mouthed alien?* “Murk and mystery” doesn’t describe your

conflicted thoughts at that moment. Another *M*-word pops to the forefront of your mind . . . something Cain did to his brother Abel, launching many of humankind's problems. But after you are done seeing red and your skyrocketing pulse settles, you think better of it. Prison orange really isn't your best color.

What exactly happened? You've just experienced your own creature from the black lagoon, and it does somewhat resemble your child on the outside.

"Murk and mystery" doesn't describe your conflicted thoughts at that moment. Another *M*-word pops to the forefront of your mind.

A Murky, Mysterious World

I'll be blunt. The middle-school years are some of the hardest for parents, educators, and psychologists to get their heads around. That's because the age at which a child goes through puberty, that time when his or her hormones kick in, can vary so greatly. Children who are in *pubescence* or *preadolescence*—the two terms are interchangeable—experience the uncomfortable state of their bodies being in constant change. An 11-year-old girl can be a pubescent in May, but by September, whoa! You've got an adolescent on your hands. For some girls, if an unknowing bystander assumed she was 17, you'd be hard-pressed to argue the point. Some kids grow up that quickly. And in today's world, the age in which puberty kicks in is dropping lower and lower all the time.

During pubescence, there is a wide range regarding middle-schoolers' maturity levels physically, emotionally, relationally, and intellectually.

Take, for instance, the huge difference between a sixth-grade boy and an eighth-grade girl. The sixth-grade boy is likely to be

a little boy in so many ways. He might be five inches shorter than the girl, and his voice range is still basically soprano. As embarrassing as his “girly voice” is to him, especially when he’s in the same school with the more manly eighth-graders, the cracking to come next will be even more so. For that sixth-grader, the signs of male anatomy development are probably the same as those he had in elementary school.

But his hormones have already begun to launch a mental switch, even if his body hasn’t caught up. In elementary school, either girls had cooties and he ran from them, or, if he liked a girl, he pulled her hair or tried to wrestle her. Now he finds his eyes resting in a particular place on a girl’s shirt and on her beautifully sculpted behind. Mysterious shivers run through his body. But old boyish behaviors are still kicked into gear. If he likes a girl, he’ll bump her with his shoulder. He’s not clued in to the subtleties of male-female relationships. His approach is more like what you’d see on Monday Night RAW. *Cool*, he thinks. *If I want her to know I like her, I’ll just do a wrestling move on her.*

As for a sixth-grade boy’s intellectual development? Spiders are on his mind. His purpose? To find one and plant it in a girl’s locker and watch her scream. That would make his day, and he’d get her attention too.

Contrast that to the eighth-grade girl. She may still look like a little girl; she may be a late bloomer. But she can also truly be a young woman, including having the ability to attract an older boy’s attention with curves in all the right places, as well as the physical ability to conceive and carry a baby. She may have had her period since third or fourth grade. Even a touch of makeup can catapult her looks into the high-school category, making her very interesting to older boys.

But that eighth-grade girl doesn’t have any idea how voluptuous she really is. She’s too busy dealing with her own emotional ups and downs based on the changes in her hormones. For her,

love and romance aren't about the physical act of sex; they're about the emotional connection. When a boy likes her, her world suddenly bursts into rosy color. Everything about life is good, just because that boy is paying attention to her and thinks she's special. However, when he turns his attention to someone else, or she even hears that he doesn't like her anymore, her world crashes down around her and everything turns bleak and gray.

If you peeked into her diary, here's what you would likely see: drawings of intertwined hearts, with her name and a boy's name inside, and scribbles that say, "I think I'm in love" and "I wonder if he likes me." She daydreams in math class and doodles a boy's last name after her first name, just to see what they look like together. She imagines that boy holding her hand, gazing into her eyes, kissing her . . .

So when the sixth-grade boy, who is gaga over that girl, shoulder-bumps her to get her attention, he gains her attention, all right. But it's not the kind he wants. "Boys are so stupid," she announces in a condescending tone in his general direction. Then, chin raised high, she links arms with a girlfriend and struts past him.

However, if a finely developed eighth-grade male specimen happens to be walking that same hallway, the girl's relational behavior changes drastically. A well-placed giggle, a flip of the hair, and a flirtatious glance out of the corner of her eye are only a few of the behaviors intended to draw the boy in, like a spider drawing prey into its web. Add a little extra hip sway in the walk, and that male won't know what hit him. He's a goner. He may look like a high-schooler physically, but he has no hope

As for a sixth-grade boy's intellectual development?

Spiders are on his mind. His purpose? To find one and plant it in a girl's locker and watch her scream. That would make his day.

of matching wits with the eighth-grade girl. She'll always have the upper hand.

If you check out her favorite YouTube playlist, you'll have a clue as to what's on her mind and the state of her emotions. Many of the songs and videos will be about love and romance, as she's dreaming of finding her "one and only." Just as her body prepares to someday become a mother, her mind launches into family mode. Ever noticed how eighth-grade girls suddenly think babies are cute and want to coo over them and hold them, when a year or two earlier

Ever noticed how eighth-grade girls suddenly think babies are cute and want to coo over them and hold them?

they only gave babies a cursory glance or treated them as a noisy interruption?

The eighth-grade girl's intellectual processing on just about any subject would run circles around that sixth-grade boy, making his head spin. No way can he keep up.

So instead, he continues to do goofy things to gain her attention, which only annoys her. When the girl screams at the

spider in her locker, he's stupid enough not only to be close by but to look outwardly thrilled so she knows he's the one who did it. Even her yelling, "You're such an idiot!" means to him, *Hey, she knows who I am. She acknowledged me.* (See what I mean about missing the nuances?)

But if that girl cries? He's terrified at this alien act and runs for cover, unable to cope with a female's waterworks.

Other than muttering about his stupidity, however, the girl has erased the sixth-grade boy from her mind. She's mesmerized by the older boys strolling down the hallway in front of her and engaged in chatting with the girls in her exclusive clique. She's too busy trying to figure out life in general—and her life in particular and her myriad roles—to spend much thought time on a boy whom she clearly doesn't consider dating material.

Sneak up on that clique of girls at school after they pass one of those older masculine specimens, and you're likely to overhear something like this:

Girl 1: "Oh, he's soooo cute! You think he likes me?"

Girl 2: "Of course he likes you. He looked at you."

Girl 3: "Yeah, he wouldn't give you a look if he didn't like you."

Girl 2: "Especially *that* kind of look."

All three girls exchange their own look.

Girl 1: "Really?" She giggles and does a little dance. "You think?"

Girl 2 and 3 chime together: "Yeah, we think."

And the conversation continues down the hallway.

Now, would middle-school boys ever have a conversation like that? Not on your life!

Talk about a chasm! So if you feel like you're casting around in the mud from moment to moment to figure out your kids and what you can do to help them and yourself, you're not alone. They can't figure themselves out either.

Caught in the Middle

For the purposes of this book, I'm defining the middle-school years as those when your child is approximately ages 11 through 13—the turbulent years between elementary school and high school. I don't stipulate which grades are considered "middle school," because schools and state stipulations vary. *Junior high*, a term some still use for *middle school*, can cover grades six through eight or seven through nine. No matter the grades it covers, the term *middle school* is apropos indeed, since children ages 11 to 13 are truly caught in the middle.

On one end, they are still young children, craving the protection, comfort, and safe boundaries of parental guidance. On the

other end, they are heading toward young adulthood and desire freedom and independence from parental constraints. The constant internal struggle between the two creates an “I love you/I hate you” tug-of-war that can change their response to you instantaneously. You know which side of the love/hate war is winning if your son allows you to walk by his side rather than 12 feet behind—his usual request when he’s around his peers. But even when he’s in that “I love you” mode, Mom, you never hug or kiss your son in front of his peers. And I mean *never*.

Kids who are caught in the middle are not only trying to fine-tune their relationship with you and what their role in your home is, they’re trying to figure out their positions and jockey for roles among their peers. Competition there is fierce.



What Worked for Us

I’ll never forget the day my daughter told me, “Mom, stop trying to talk to my friends. It’s embarrassing.” I was shocked. Our home had been a parade of her friends for as long as I could remember, and I always talked to them. Then my daughter hit seventh grade, and suddenly I was shunned. A longtime girlfriend reminded me of our junior-high years, when we were pom-pom girls. Our moms used to cheer loudly for us in the stands, and then they’d burst into our group of friends afterward and start hugging everybody.

“Wow, that was embarrassing,” my friend said.

We both laughed.

I got the point. I’d done basically the same thing to my daughter that my mom had done to me. My daughter, though, had the guts to tell me to back off and let her have her own relationship with her friends. I never would have had the courage to tell my mom that. Yes, my daughter could have done it more nicely, but I got the point. I backed off because I don’t want to lose what’s most important to me—my daughter’s trust and heart.

Francine, Connecticut

Parent SOS

- S**tay calm. Don't be drawn into your child's gale-force winds.
- O**pen your mouth only when they ask for your opinion or offer a statement about what happened during their day. Then say, "Tell me more about that." Never, *ever* ask them questions.
- S**hut your mouth before you say anything you might regret. Count to 10. Think, *Will this matter a day from now? A week from now? A year from now?*

"They can be truly horrible and nasty to each other," says an educator who has worked in middle-school environments for over 30 years. "But some days they can be surprisingly charming and kind. You never know which behavior to expect until you're right in the middle of the situation and the mood of the moment plays out."

A middle-school principal reported, "Within a 30-minute period yesterday I dealt with a food fight in the cafeteria, sexting in the girls' bathroom, and bullying in the PE hallway. When I got back to my office, two sixth-graders handed me a plate of pink frosted cupcakes. Sometimes I have to shake my head at the widely varying behavior."

EGRS

Unless you UPS those middle-schoolers to Zimbabwe for three years, they will be living with you (or, if you're divorced, they'll likely be with you part of the time). So here's a bit of advice in a memorable acronym. Think of your middle-schoolers as EGRS, for *Extra Grace Required Sometimes*. Whether you roll through the middle-school years with only a few meteors here and there, whether your ride more closely resembles interplanetary war, or whether you're somewhere

floating in the stratosphere in between, your child needs you at his side . . . as well as all the grace you can muster.

What can you do to smooth the journey for both of you?

Expect the unexpected . . . and relax in between. When you expect almost anything to happen and it does, you can't be blind-sided, can you?

With your “verbally skilled” children (a nice way to put it, don't you think?), when no meteors hit your living space, you can sit back, relax, and smile. Enjoy that temporary, beautiful view of the stars and the amazing quiet . . . at least for 15 minutes, until the next meteor ricochets into the room. Use the quiet times to gain long-term perspective and to strategize next steps.

If you have one of those quiet zombies living with you—who seem to stagger from school to the kitchen for food and back to their computer game with only nonsensical grunts in between—you may want to cautiously enter their space at times to make sure all is well. (Hint: Tantalizing aromas open any door, even one with “Stay Out—My Space” posted on it. Cinnamon or chocolate works especially well.)

Give them room to grow and change. Just because your child is up in the stratosphere one day doesn't mean he won't be on earth the next. And a single fight with a sibling doesn't mean they hate each other. In a few hours, those two will probably be sitting side by side, watching *NCIS*. The child you think is all about himself may surprise you by helping an elderly neighbor up the steps with her groceries . . . all on his own.

Every day your middle-schooler is experimenting with how life works and trying to figure out his role in it. Encourage those efforts when they are in a positive direction by saying things like, “I saw you helping Mrs. Dawson. That must have felt good to be able to do that for someone who has a hard time doing it herself. I'm sure she appreciated it.” Secretly, he wants to please you. Knowing that works to your benefit . . . and the entire family's.

Remember what your own middle-school years were like. Flash back to your first day of middle school—what you were wearing, how you did your hair, how you felt the first time you stepped into the doors of that foreign place. It felt so huge, so alien, so overwhelming. Some of you may not be able to remember a thing, because middle school was so rough that you’ve blocked out all the bad memories. But taking a few minutes to reflect on the highs and lows of your middle-school years will drum up a little empathy for

You Know You Have a Middle-Schooler When . . .

- He does wild bird calls at the most inappropriate moments.
- She loves jeans with holes in them because they’re popular. (Back in your day, you’d be embarrassed to wear them because everybody would think you were poor.)
- Every conversation is dotted with the words *always* and *never*.
- He used to hate taking showers, but now you catch him sniffing his own armpits. (That used to be your job as you caught him before he flung himself out the door for school.)
- Her day is made or ruined by one comment from one peer.
- He can’t walk through an archway without jumping up to touch it.
- His baseball cap is usually at the five-o’clock position, and the crotch of his pants slides down to his thighs or knees.
- Jekyll and Hyde can’t compare to her mood swings.
- He flexes his biceps in the bathroom mirror.
- One simple pimple becomes Mount St. Helens.
- He grew five inches over the summer.
- He or she defies gravity. She’s always on the ceiling about something. With a running start, he can jump 12 steps in one leap, do a Michael Jordan–like 360, and then complete the last 8 steps with equal ease, all to announce, “I’m ready for dinner.”

your kid. And for him, it's even more difficult, with all the social media influences pushing him to grow up faster.

Sift through mood changes for the real reasons behind the emotion, and don't take the mood switches personally. Your middle-schooler doesn't have a devious plan to make your life miserable, but you're the one who often catches the grief. Take that as a compliment. She's smart enough to know that if she rags on her friends, they'll ditch her. Teachers won't put up with it either, and she'll discover quickly that detention after school is no fun. So she comes home and gives her next candidate a go—a sibling, if she has one. But siblings aren't dumb either. They usually go running to Mama to narc on her, and her action backfires. Who do you think is next in the pecking order to fight with? You, Mom or Dad, because you're "safe," and she reasons, *They're stuck. They have to put up with me.* Depending on your parenting style, your child's attempt is either successful and thus worth trying again or halted in its tracks due to your dictatorial control.

Wise moms and dads use a different method. They learn how to listen, especially for what's behind her flurry of angry words—the real reason she's upset. Did a supposed "friend" circulate an embarrassing rumor about her? Did she fail a test because she spent her time texting instead of studying, and now she's mad at herself and afraid to tell you she failed? Did she find out in PE class that her BMI (body mass index) is 29 percent and she's considered overweight? Worse, the cattiest girl in her class overheard that?

Often the real reason won't be revealed until later, when the dust settles. If you maintain your calm, go about your business, and don't react to the emotion, you'll be surprised what you learn a few hours or a few days down the road.

Wise parents never, ever engage in a fight. Fighting is an act of cooperation that works only if both sides engage. Amazing how a fight loses its heat when one person withdraws. All the fun goes out of it too.

While you're giving your child that extra grace required, don't forget to give some to yourself. You won't always say or do the right thing when you're battling that creature from the black lagoon. But don't worry. Tomorrow's a new day, and your child is more forgiving than you might think. So lighten up!

Look on the bright side. You won't even have to spend a couple bucks renting the latest sci-fi flick. You've already got it in full color in your living room. All you have to do is sit back and watch.