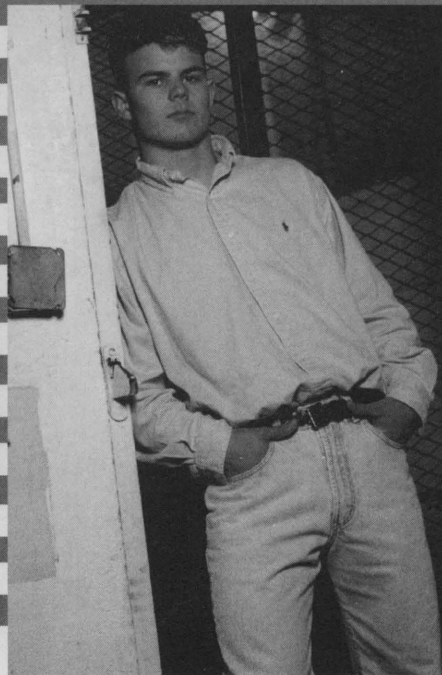
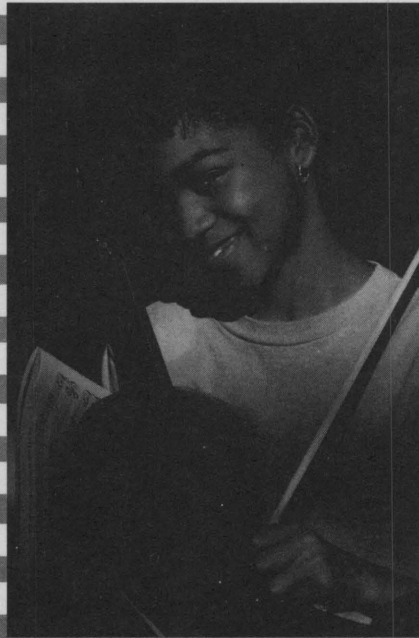


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Virginia Cooperative Extension

*Training Guide for the  
Child Development Program*

# A Conversation: What Does it Mean to Live and Work with 10- to 14- Year-Old Children



VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE  
AND STATE UNIVERSITY

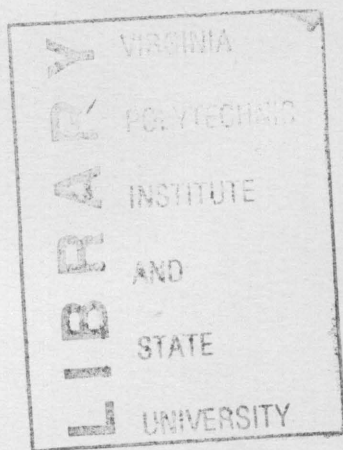


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**A Conversation:  
What Does it Mean to Live and  
Work with 10- to 14-  
Year-Old Children**



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## A CONVERSATION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE AND WORK WITH 10- TO 14-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN?

There are many textbooks that tell us about children of upper elementary and middle school age. There are also many self-help books for parents, teachers and other adults. In light of these resources we have decided that instead of writing a guide about this age group it would be more effective and meaningful if we could capture the essence of these children through the eyes of significant adults who share their lives. In this way, we can gain valuable insight into what these children are like and how to work with them, from real people who live with them daily in various situations.

We invited a group of adults to have a dialogue on living and working with children ages 10 to 14. These adults are “experts” in their own right. They play multiple roles in the lives of these children, as we all do. For example one can be a mother, a wife, a teacher, and a counselor at different times, and in different situations. With this in mind, picture the group of eight experts together who are: mothers, fathers, middle grade teachers, professors, guidance counselors, school administrators, ministers, case workers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and so forth.

We met with the intention of having a good conversation — sharing stories and exploring together — on what we know and care about children in general, and children ages 10 to 14 in particular, with no set agenda in mind. What we all have in common: we find satisfaction working with this age group, have a history of working with them, and view learning as a continuous process of living and learning from each other — adults and children alike.

Through this conversation of sharing our experiences and telling our stories we covered some crucial aspects of children of this age and challenges adults face in working with them. Yet, what

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we discussed is by no means exhaustive. The conversation encompasses a range of issues related to: social-emotional development, physical development, cognitive development, moral development, adolescent egocentrism (imaginary audience, personal fable), sense of self and identity, peer pressure, social pressure, present and future orientation, schooling and academic achievement, and above all, parents and adults, as teachers and role models, in providing structure, support and guidance to children. For further information about development in middle grades please consult the resources listed at the end of this guide.

In order to capture the knowledge, thoughts and feelings of those who engaged in this conversation, we have done minimal editing, so that their voices will be heard. Their voices speak for themselves and need no formal commentary. It is just “plain talk” that reflects knowledge, understanding and caring. The reader is challenged to read and reflect on the stories and the comments alone, and more preferably in the company of others. We invite and encourage you to share your stories with your colleagues, parents and children so you can live and learn together.

## **Discussants**

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| Mary DeVier-Scott | Parent and teacher  |
| Steve Fairchild   | University faculty in Early Childhood Education and middle grades teacher   |
| Victoria Fu       | University faculty in Child Development and Early Childhood Education       |
| Martin Hayduk     | Middle school teacher   |
| Marilyn Heishman  | Pastor and parent   |
| Lois Mitchell     | Parent, grandparent and youth leader  |
| Kathleen Wampler  | Retired university extension faculty in Family and Child Development        |
| Charles Watson    | University faculty in Middle Grades Teacher Education, parent and counselor |

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## SOCIAL PRESSURES

When I think back to when I was a 10- to 14-year-old, things were so different. A computer was unheard of in my time. Now, my children range in age from 25 to 35. Computers were just beginning to come in when they were teenagers. Now my grandchildren have computers in their schools. Things have changed so much. I thought life was fast for my children, it's even faster now. I wouldn't want to start raising children again because I would have a great deal of trouble adjusting to the fast pace of things. The knowledge that these children have, not only just classroom knowledge, but worldly knowledge, creates a lot of problems for them.

**Do your children have these same feelings when they talk about themselves or their children?**

Yes, my oldest one is 35, and is the mother of three. She talks about when she was in junior high, and there were drugs and alcohol but not to the extent as now. Her brother is 25 and is an inner city third grade teacher. He shares the war stories from there, and it just really bothers her. She is concerned for her children and feels the need to give them a good background and basis to grow.

**It seems there is a 10-year age difference between your daughter and your son. I wonder when you were raising them, did you see any difference in the way they interacted socially? Any differences in the kind of social pressures they might have experienced?**

### **Age and Sex Differences**

Yes, but it could be the fact that she is a girl and he is a boy. She was easier to guide and to steer. She never wanted to disappoint us. She always wanted to be what we wanted her to be. But, Joey knew how to talk the talk, knew how to get around, and walk the walk of the young people. He was very adaptive. There were two

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other children in between so there were four of them in that 10-year span. I also found that I was more lenient with the younger one, Joey, than we probably were with, Martha, the older one. I don't think we expected any less of Joey as far as performance in school and so forth, but since he was the baby he got away with more. My children accused me of that and I'm sure that is probably true. Martha did not get too involved socially, although she was involved in many school activities, she had no desire to attend the parties and so forth like other young people. But she was very popular in her own right. Joey was captain of the football team, captain of the wrestling team, he was a leader. He chose a different route. He was a party animal.

That is interesting. So the ways they were different during adolescence could be due either to personality or gender differences, or both.

### **Taking More Responsibilities Earlier**

We used to say that "teenage" was a terrible age, and that none of us would ever want to go back and be teenagers again. That's because we went through so many changes. I think those changes are happening earlier. I think part of it is the environment they are exposed to — much more technology, much more push to be independent earlier. The children must take more responsibility at eight, nine, and ten. In many homes with both parents working, the children are just expected to pick up the responsibilities and to fend for themselves a little more independently and earlier.

### **Making More Decisions Earlier**

I think the peer pressure and the models that children have today are very different from when we were young. I have two kids and four step-kids all of whom I have seen go through puberty. The various experiences they have are typical kinds of textbooks things. What I notice is that nobody goes through puberty the same way — nobody did it the same way, nobody hit this stage at the same time,

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nobody had these feelings at the same time. I think kids today are faced with having to make many kinds of decisions for a variety of reasons, that they are completely unprepared for; they are not ready for these decisions. They don't have enough knowledge and mental maturity to make rational decisions about whether to use drugs, or to engage in sexual relationships, or to decide on where to go to college. But they are seeing these decisions as important, and they are trying to face these decisions at very young ages; I think there is something really sad about that.

## Peer Pressures

**Let's talk more about the idea of peer influence. All of you have worked with or have children. Is there an age difference in how they react to peer pressure? Is there a difference between younger children, like age 10, and older children, 14?**

I didn't see a lot of peer influence in the early elementary grades until the children started to mature physically — when the girls started going through menstruation, and the boys started going through voice changing — that is when I noticed the most difference with peer influence. Until the children felt like they were becoming adults, they seemed to be more interested in pleasing mom and dad. When they become more mature physically, they start branching out and pushing to see what they can do. All three of my girls are different too, but I think, I don't know if it's a gender thing as much as it is a personality thing, or oldest vs. youngest child thing.

In the classroom, some kids are much more influenced by peers than others. Some kids have a much stronger sense of self and of who they are, and they seem to be able to rise above peer pressure, regardless. Other kids just can't seem to make a move without the fear of — “Am I going to be accepted?” “Am I going to fit in?” This a real common concern of kids in the 10 to 14 age range.

I agree.

My two other children gave in to the peer pressures, even though they were strong-willed.

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## PHYSICAL CHANGES AND GROWTH SPURTS

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My own daughter is maturing very rapidly physically and much faster than most of her friends. She is still very much a little girl in a lot of respects, very innocent, but as she gets more mature I see she wants to change her hair style, and she wants to get her ears pierced. It's bound to happen at a certain point, but there are certainly personality differences.

**What grade is she in?**

She is entering seventh.

They wear their insides (feelings) on their outside a lot and at the same time they are so conscious of their outside — who they look like, how they look to other people. Appearance is extraordinarily important to them.

I remember when my son discovered his nose. He was in seventh grade, and he was beginning to develop. His extremities were beginning to get much bigger, and all of a sudden, he was outgrowing his shoes every two weeks. His nose came out of his head, and he thought that something was wrong with his nose because all of a sudden he discovered that his nose was huge, and it was. His nose got bigger before the rest of his face did. He was horrified and thought he'd be a bachelor for life. It was difficult for him to get through school that year because he felt that everyone was looking at him. Everybody was looking at his nose!

We need to affirm with the children that physical changes are normal. Everybody goes through growth spurts. It is quite normal at this age to be graceful one day and awkward as a goose the next day. It is amazing how much one's physical image impacts on the rest of you. His nose affected his self-esteem, social interaction, and school work.

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I don't know too many adults who wouldn't be real concerned if they knew that within the next three or four years their physical body was going to change dramatically. They would wonder whether they would have successful relationships with their mates and the opposite sex. It all depends on the outcome. I think most adults would be pretty upset and worried too.

As a middle level child you are becoming very aware of the opposite sex, so physical appearance is even more important.

I remember when one of my friend's daughters was of middle school age. She was very conscious of the size of her feet. She asked her mother not to comment on the size, when they went shoe shopping. So instead of the nose, for this girl it was the feet and shoes.

## The Early and Late Maturer

It is not easy to be the physically smallest child in the class or the biggest kid in the class — to be 6 feet tall, weighing 240 pounds in the eighth grade. The body and the mind and the brain and the intellectual development are by no means connected. In many cases, it makes it tough for us as people who work with these kids. So many things are changing all at once. All aspects of their development are changing, at different times, at different speed. It is especially difficult with adolescents, who change from day-to-day — they may handle themselves brilliantly one day, and they cannot follow the basics the next. It is tough, whether you are responsible for four children in child care after-school program, or 24 children in a classroom.

You talked about the big kid in the eighth grade. This reminds me that one of my sons was really a big boy. Everybody thought because he was big, even at five, he was too big to ride a big wheel. They thought he should act like an 8- or 9-year-old because of his size, but he was not ready. He was still a child who was not ready to make "8-year-old" decisions. When he got to early adolescence he was unsure of what was expected of him and that was hard. It is "no man's land."

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## FUTURE ORIENTATION - IS THERE A FUTURE?

By the time teenagers they are 13, 14 and 15, they are more into a pattern of what is in their future. They are more future-oriented than we ever were at that age. We were thinking when we were juniors in high school what we might want to be, where we might want to go to college. We have seventh and eighth graders now talking about, "I want to do this," "I want to go to this college," "This college demands these grades and I have to make these grades." I see a future orientation among younger children. On the flip side of that are children who wonder, "Is there going to be a future?" "Maybe I should live my life for the moment, for right now, because there isn't going to be a future down the road." I think there is some of both of that with the children.

### Personal Fable

I think children this age sometimes think they are immortal, that nothing can hurt them.

I agree. You take TV for instance, and I'm not saying TV is bad, but if you look at the TV, how many people do you see that are killed and jump right back up and go on and do something else. I don't think children really understand that death is death. I mean it is a finality. I think many of them feel that it is not going to happen to them. I have heard this. I worked in a drug and alcohol treatment center for a while. We got so many young patients, and they were like, "We didn't think this would happen to us. We thought we could do this. We could smoke a little pot and we could drink a little or whatever and nothing would happen to us. But it does." I don't think that they believe that bad things can happen to them and that death is final.

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I think there is also a segment of young people who really see the finality of death because of the violence they experienced in their neighborhoods and in their families. There is a sense of disillusionment and hopelessness. This group of children is different from the ones you described — those with a future orientation. Many of them do not see a future in their lives. “Is there a future?” is not a question to be asked and discussed.

## **Hopelessness**

I think a great many children are seeing their life as hopeless. There is no hope. In many cases that is an accurate perception because their lives are hopeless. In many areas children live the opportunities and odds of getting out of those situations are almost nil. I think besides the peer pressure, they give themselves permission to get what they can out of life, in anyway they can, now.

Right now.

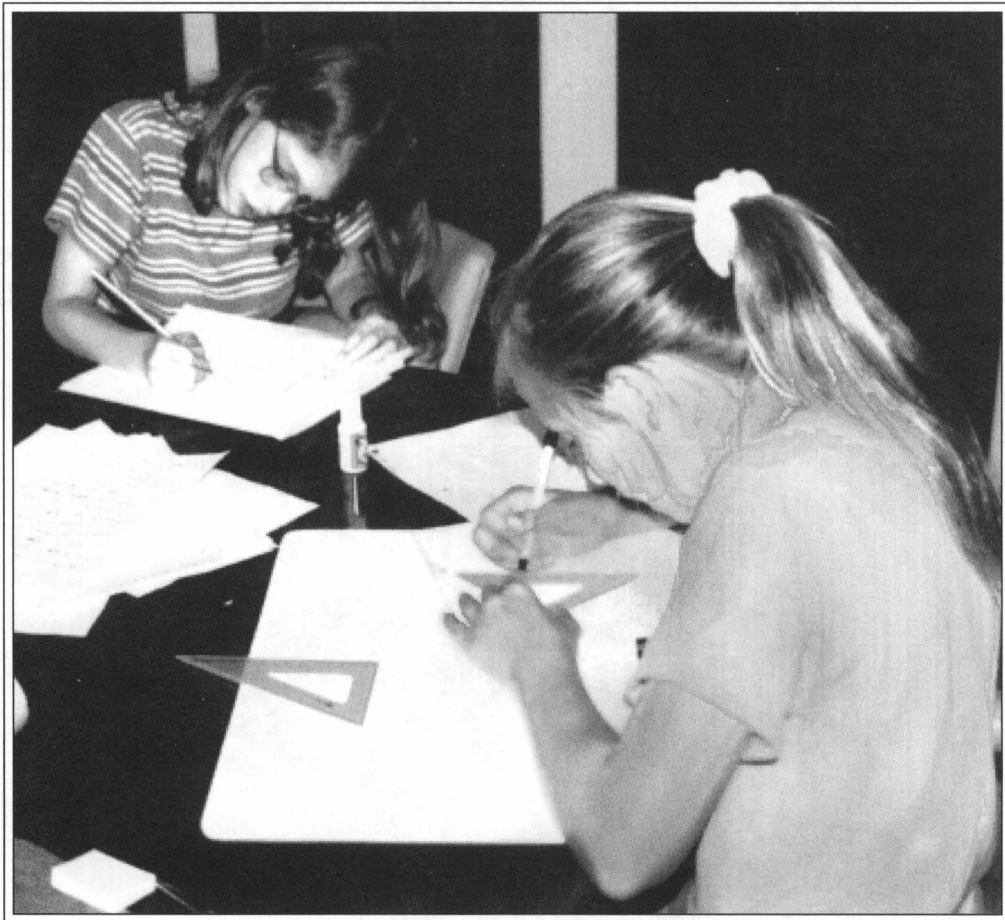
And they do it. They know they are going to die before they are 20 or 21 years old, and so, they have no remorse for what they do. There is no risk.



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## CAUGHT BETWEEN CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD DILEMMA - IN “NO MAN’S/NO WOMAN’S LAND”

I think when I look back at my own youth, for me, 12, 13, and 14 was a really hard age because I was in “no woman’s land.” I wasn’t an adult and I wasn’t a child. I think today’s children are facing that sooner. They are facing that at age 12, 10 or younger what I was facing at 13, 14, and 15. I think that the maturation rate has really speeded up.



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# IN NEED OF CARING AND RESPONSIBLE PARENTS AND ADULTS

## Caring: Structure, Limits, Guidance

You lay the ground work and set the limits for your children. I think in the classroom one of the most frustrating things for me is to work with children who you realize have not had limits set for them at home. Some parents actually get angry with us because of something we are doing to correct their child and they come to their children's defense. What we really need is for parents to support us in what we do.

I think it is our responsibility, as people who work with these kids, to set the limits, be very specific about the consequences that are going to happen and to be consistent with the meting out of those consequences. I don't believe in corporal punishment or any kind of physical punishment. But if the consequence is that you will be grounded or there won't be TV or you won't get to do this or whatever, the punishment should always happen. What children don't like are surprises and what they consider as arbitrary. One of the favorite words of a middle school kid is "fair." They want everything that happens to them and their friends to be fair. They'll say "that's not fair" a lot.

They appreciate fair discipline, as long as the "punishment fits the crime."

I think middle grade children appreciate structure. They want structure and they need the structure. They may not tell you in so many words but they do, I think.

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They'll push to the very limit because they want somebody to help them set standards and expectations. I think it is easier for them to stand up and say "No" or "I can't" to those who challenge them to engage in negative behaviors when they know the expectations.

I was at a camp one time with a group of early teens, and one of the girls made a statement which could be interpreted a lot of different ways, "Well a lot of times I don't even come in (home) until six o'clock in the morning." The other kids really jumped on that really fast. "How do you get by with that?" "My parents don't care," she said. I wonder if the girl said that as a way of getting attention in the group? I think there are a lot of questions and a lot of things you could ask about that. Was that really her pattern? What else could she do and get by with? I think she was begging for the parameters and the limits that we were talking about. She was begging for limits.

I think sometimes they act out when they don't have consistency and limits in their lives. Some children say that their parents let them do anything, that "my parents don't care what I do." I think what they meant was that their parents are inconsistent in setting limits and standards of behavior.

Children need rules. I think it is difficult for kids because most of them are thinking about self and friends so it is easy to forget rules because the kids are really not paying attention to both of them. I am convinced after spending most of my life around these children that when you asked them whether they were thinking when they did not follow a rule, and they said, "I don't know," I think that they really don't know. They really weren't thinking about rules or forgetting their homework or forgetting books. They are terribly disorganized. So, I think the better we understand that, the better we will be able to deal with the kids. Perhaps be a little more tolerant of their disorganization, but at the same time, teach them how to be organized.

In my experience, if you state your expectations, they will meet those.

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The expectations need to be consistently high. We also have to be consistent to model those, and I'm not sure we always do. I'm not sure the culture does.

The kids at this age want guidance, but they don't want to be told. They want to be given choices which I think is good. They need to learn how to make good choices. The way they learn to make good choices is to be allowed to make choices. But we also have a responsibility. I think kids want guidance in what those choices are and help with figuring out the pros and cons of what decisions to make. I think that is the only way they learn how to make good decisions.

I think you said that children ages 10 to 14 are not mentally mature, or ready to make certain decisions. They need the guidance in thinking through, or at the least, in the process of making choices and decisions. Unfortunately, a lot of children miss out on that when parents or other significant people are not around or cannot be around to help them, to guide them.

This also makes it doubly tough for people who work with this age group. It is so difficult to see where a kid is with respect to cognitive (intellectual/mental) development, and whether he/she has the ability to see abstractions, and to figure out what might happen two or three steps down the road.

An example is related to watching TV. I think as parents and as people who work with children that we have a responsibility to watch what they are watching on TV. We should not just let them sit in front of the "electronic babysitter." We have a responsibility to sit there with them. I didn't allow my children to watch the slice-and-dice movies, the horror film, and some cartoons in my house. They know that they cannot watch that garbage because I often said, "Garbage in, garbage out." Recently, two of my grown children were visiting me. One of them rented some movies. Her sister asked, "What movies did you get?" She showed them to her sister then she said, "Oops! Put this one back in the bag. Mom won't let us watch this one in her house." They just laughed. At their age they know

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and can decide what is “trash,” but at ages 10, 11, 12, and 14 they can’t. They’ll just sit and let all of the garbage go in and not realize or be able to decide what is trash.

## **Caring: Support and Trust**

You could see a pattern. As a parent I could see it. There are certain parents that you see at the school functions, there are certain parents that you see at the church functions, and there are other parents that you never see, and there are a variety of reasons for that. But after a while those children whose parents don’t come to school, church or other functions will tend to come to us and talk to us about their problems, if they trust us and feel that we care. That’s where we have to take responsibility.

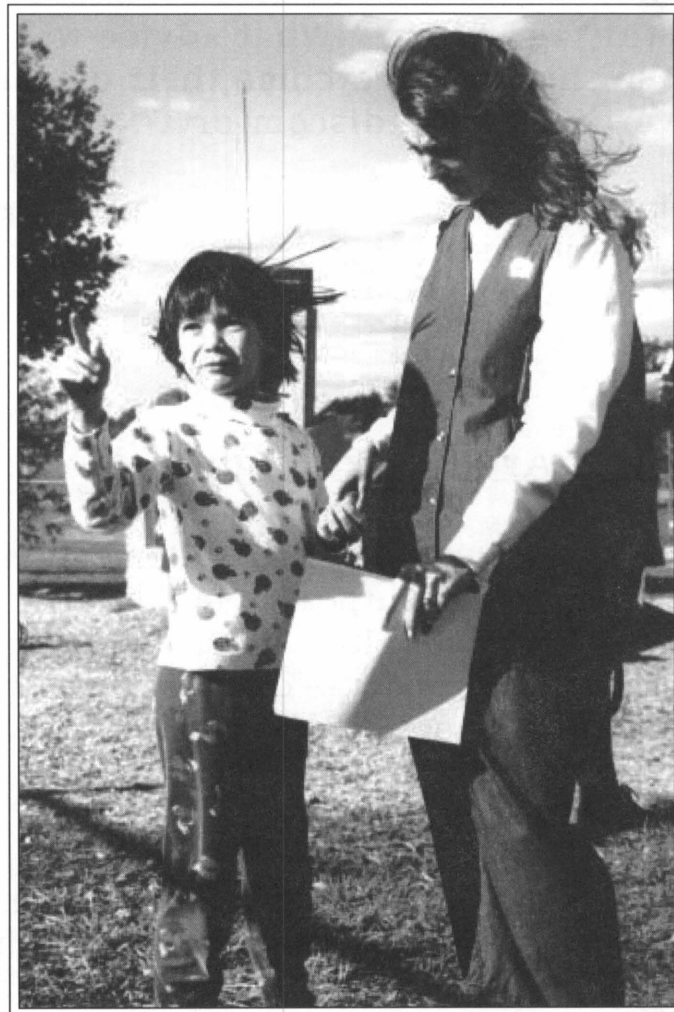
Sometimes children turn to a caring teacher, caregiver, coach, grandparent, or other adults that work with them for support and guidance.

I remember a child called me one time and she said, “I can’t get my mom on the phone.” I said, “Well what do you need?” She gave me the scenario and said, “I just want to know what you think.” I said, “What do you think?” She said, “Well I don’t think I ought to do this.” I said, “Well that’s a good choice, and I don’t think you ought to do it.” She then said, “Well I didn’t think it was a good choice either, but I wanted to check with you and I knew you would tell me the truth.” That made me feel really good! I thought to myself how bad it was that her mother worked in a factory where she couldn’t come to the phone and answer her child’s question. Now I am lucky, I have never worked in a job where I couldn’t take a personal call from my child. I think that makes a big difference. Some of the parents are in positions where they can’t come to the phone, and that is really hard on them because they may want to do a really good job, but the circumstances don’t always permit it.

That is why it is so important that children have caring, dependable adults they can turn to for support.

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Right back to the fact that they are caught in “no mans land” is what I call it. They aren’t adults. It’s been an experience in all my work with children. Nobody wanted to work with this age group (ages 10 to 14) we are talking about. I don’t know why I like working with them the best, unless it is because I can remember that I was blessed in that I had both parents in my home. This is not the case with many children. Many children have to come home to an empty house. There are many single parent families and many families where both parents have to work outside the home.



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## **DO YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE LIVING AND WORKING WITH MIDDLE LEVEL CHILDREN?**

In working with a lot of adults, I find many of them do not feel comfortable working with the 10 to 14 age group.

Then they shouldn't be working with them.

That's right. **What are some of their discomforts about working with this age group? What advice would you give these people, so they can overcome their discomforts? Is it possible to overcome these discomforts?**

I don't think that people who don't like middle level children should be working with them.

I agree.

### **Good Intentions Are Not Enough**

They might have wonderful, wonderful intentions. They might have the most glorious moral purposes, but they are not going to be very effective if they do not like kids of that age group. All the things we have been talking about — different sizes, shapes, the loud mouths, and the quiet ones, they are just everywhere, if you don't like that then you should not be working with them. You should work with another age group.

It is not only inappropriate and not good for the children, but what a way to spend your life doing something you don't want to do, but feel like it's your duty to do. To me if you are going to work with children because it is your duty it is the wrong reason. Children have so much to teach us and so much to give us. We should treat them as individuals. We should not expect that by this

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age they need to be doing this and by this age they need to be doing that. They're people, they are individuals, and we need to love them and work with them as people.

I agree with you. If you don't feel comfortable working with children of particular ages, don't work with them. I can give you an example. I am certified to teach first through sixth grade. When I had to do my student teaching I asked to be in first and third grade. They assigned me to fourth and sixth. I guess being male in the late sixties and early seventies they thought I should teach in the upper grades. Well, when I got to student teaching in the sixth grade I knew immediately I had to finish this assignment, but I didn't want to do this (teaching sixth graders) for the rest of my career.

## **Power and Loss of Trust**

**Do you think teachers and adults who are not as comfortable with this age group often resort to the use of power in interacting with the kids?**

There is a lot of research to support this belief. Teachers who are uncomfortable use more punitive, much harsher forms of discipline.

This can turn into a power struggle with the adult and the kids. It's a no win situation for everybody involved.

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## **TO BE SUPPORTIVE OF MIDDLE LEVEL CHILDREN: WHAT PARENTS AND ADULTS NEED**

**How do you help somebody who is not comfortable with early teenagers?**

You need to earn their respect and trust.

**What are some things you can do to earn the respect of kids that age?**

Consistency is really important.

Follow through, if you say you are going to do something then do it.

I think middle level kids know good teachers from bad teachers. They know that good teachers know their material, know their content, and I think they respect that. If you can answer their questions honestly, they won't question your answer. If you don't know the answer, tell them honestly.

Also assure them that you will try to find the answer. Then be sure to find out the needed information and let them know the answer.

But on any level, make sure that you are consistent, honest and fair.

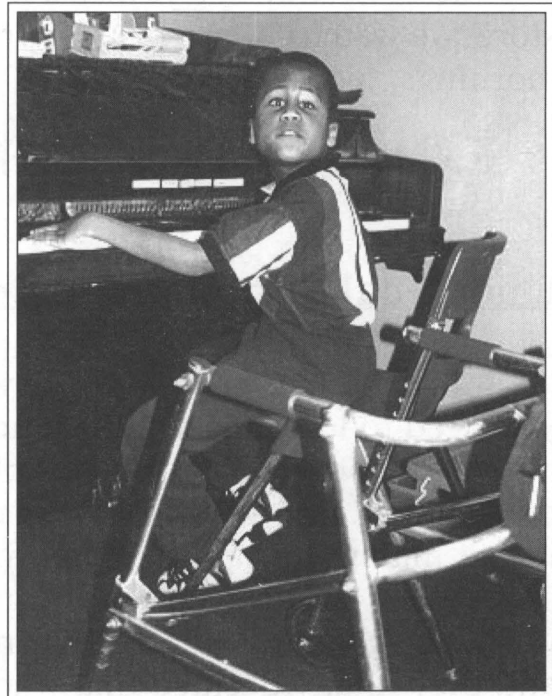
You also have to give them real choices. Sometimes adults give them choices that are not real choices. This can create a feeling of mistrust.

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## Mutual Trust and Respect

I think you have to earn their respect and at the same time let them know that you are the authority. If push comes to shove, I am still the boss. But we are going to have fun doing things together, and I understand you. You have to try a little harder to find ways to let them know that you know what they like and that you know what they enjoy. It takes a while for kids and teachers to reach that balance where that trust is built, especially with middle level kids.

I love this age because they tolerate me. I guess I am grandmotherly enough that they let me hug them and love them and they'll listen to me. And probably one of the highest compliments I was ever given was in a meeting one time with Girl Scouts. They were talking about something they wouldn't have talked about in front of their parents, nothing bad. Suddenly, one of them turned to me and said, "We forgot you were a mother too." I took that as a compliment. They trusted me enough that they felt comfortable to talk about it and knew that I would not condemn them. But if they asked, I would share my opinion with them. I thought it was a compliment.



## Sense of Humor and Sharing Experiences

I try to latch on to something that I know a child is interested in and ask them questions about that. If I have had any kind of similar experiences I'll say, "Well you know I've done that too." Sharing experiences can really help. Having a sense of humor helps also.

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If you don't have much of a sense of humor you are going to find out. Middle level kids are funny creatures, just the nature of them. They laugh when you laugh with them, sometimes you laugh at them and sometimes they laugh at you, too.

You'll find that one of the hardest things to do is to not laugh. If the children are really, really sincere about what they are saying, the hardest thing for you will be not to laugh.

Yes, it's important to be able to laugh at yourself. Don't take yourself too seriously

Kids need to see you as a human being. We go to the grocery store, we watch TV, we brush our hair and our teeth in the mornings, too.

And, you don't go to sleep in the classroom closet at night.

## **Emotional Support and Sense of Self**

I would like to share a story that I think in part shows what you need to look for in these kinds of adults. When I was in sixth grade my home room class was playing another class in a basketball tournament. It was just boys on the teams at those times. We were in the championship game, my room against another room, and the score was tied at the end of the game. We went into overtime and it was a tie again and I think it even went into overtime a second time, and they finally decided that whoever got the next basket, that team would be the winner. I made the next basket, but the other team won because I put the ball in their basket instead of ours. My father who was an athlete, four varsity letters in college in different sports, was also a coach and a Physical Education teacher in the school system. My father came out to me, while I can remember my 6th grade friends standing there crying and yelling, and said supportively to me, "What a wonderful shot. What a wonderful shot!" His recognition meant so much to me. So I think one of the

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things that helped me as far as maintaining a sense of self-worth and of self esteem was support, emotional support at the times you are on the edge.

Yes, adults can help children maintain a sense of self-worth by giving them emotional support when needed.

## **Honesty**

I think people who work with kids are going to make mistakes. Kids do not miss noticing our mistakes. So the way we handle these mistakes is also important with these kids. Honestly say, "I have made a mistake and I was wrong, therefore we are going to do it this way." We need to claim some ownership in the mistake rather than going the other direction, denying the mistake, or trying to hide it.

Denying and hiding create mistrust between each other.

I like to be able to say that if I've done something that I feel is wrong, "I'm sorry I made a mistake." Just as it is difficult for some adults to admit making a mistake, it is hard for a child that age to have to admit and take responsibility for things that they do sometimes. But if we set the example of being able to say, "I am sorry, I made a mistake," I find that makes a difference.

## **Acceptance**

Every child needs to have someone who loves and accepts him/her no matter what.

### **Somebody older or somebody their own age?**

Well, I don't know that it can come from someone their own age. That is why I think whoever the adult caregivers are they need to know that even if you notice that zit on their faces, everything is fine. The adults need to be able to constantly reassure them regardless of what is going on and realizing too, that they may not

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## Truthfulness and Honesty

**What about children this age and their conception of truth and honesty? Are they generally truthful or can you sometimes count on them telling you a non-truth?**

I think children tell the truth or lie for different reasons depending on the circumstances. They may tell a lie because they can't face the truth, or the truth is too painful so they make up something that is less painful. They make up something because they know that whatever happened, the punishment is going to be so great that they don't want to face it. It could also be that they feel that if they tell the truth on a particular thing, they wouldn't be loved anymore, their esteem will go down in our eyes, and that they'd have to start over again. I think the way that we can encourage them to tell the truth is that we can let them know that none of us are perfect, and when we make a mistake, it is a mistake and that we can start over again. We have to let them realize that they cannot do anything that will keep us from loving them.

I think most middle level kids will lie. Sometimes it is very situational. I think it has a lot to do with peers. When peers are involved, it is less cool to tell the truth, and it is cool to lie or tell a story. I think the media has an impact on that. The media glorifies crime and unethical kinds of behavior as being clever. Unethical and immoral behaviors are applauded. The bad guy is applauded because he did something clever.

And he got away without being caught.

Kids, I think, have a sense of what is a lie at a pretty young age.

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## Parents and Adults as Models

I think that children learn from their parents. If the speed limit is 55, but I think it is o.k. to do 65, and I'm not lying to kids about doing that, so it's o.k. So they think that in some circumstances its o.k. to be dishonest, but in other circumstances it is not. Teenagers have to weigh your value system against their value system and those of their friends.

How they feel about lying also has to do with how are they rewarded or punished when they have lied. Then they have to weigh against "what are the consequences" if they get caught.

Let's take that idea of punishment a little bit further. **How about in the classroom or in the home? What does the middle level child see as appropriateness or inappropriateness of punishment? How do they react to punishment?**

I think if you are fair and consistent in whatever you set up, that goes a long way as being acceptable to the children today.

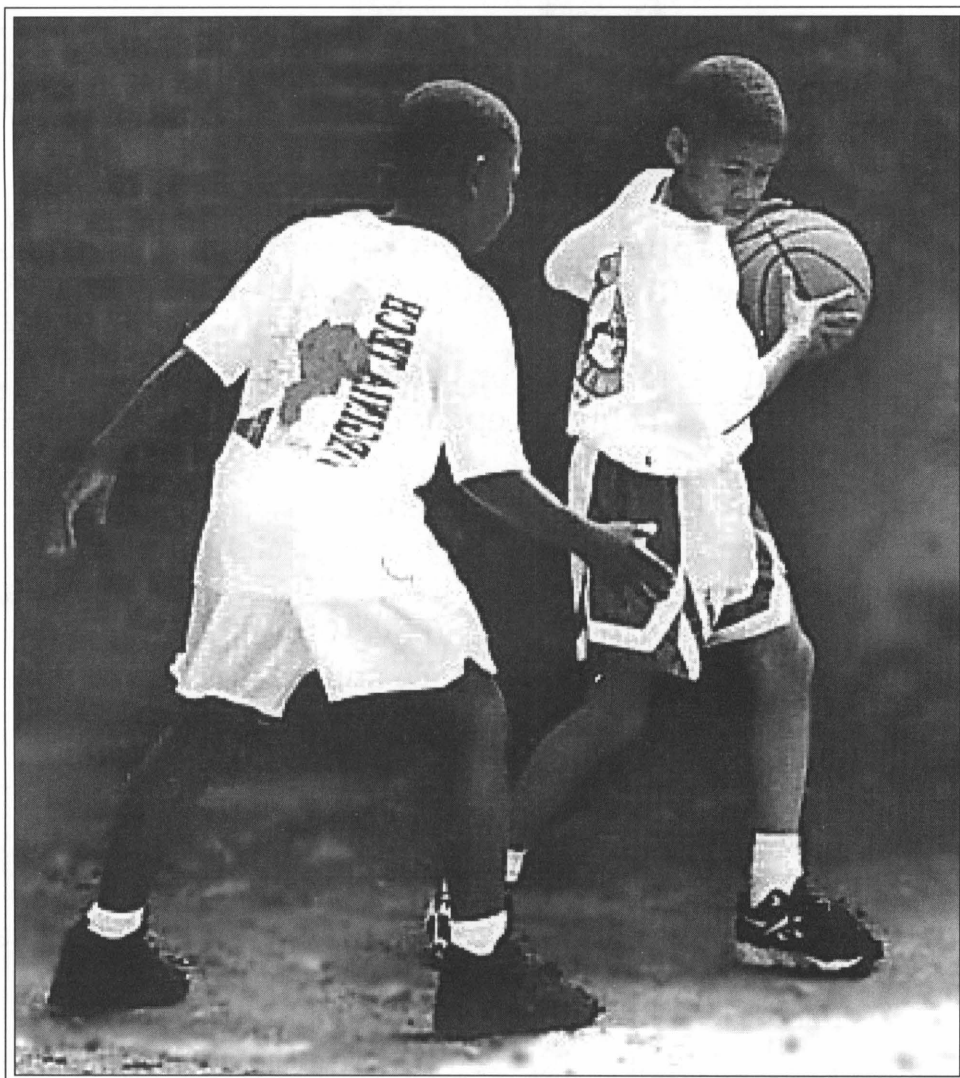
One of my greatest disappointments was probably in one of the persons that I really admired. He was my science teacher. He was also our football coach. At one time we did a unit on smoking and on what harm it did to your body and everything. This one day I was sent out for a message for Coach D, and he was out in the back of the school smoking. That destroyed everything I had been taught, and we were back at ground zero. I think if we set expectations for children, we also have to live up to these expectations. We need to serve as models.

We need to do as we say. We cannot have different standards for adults, "do as I say but not as I do."

I think that we need to be aware of opportunities to teach morals, and if we preach behavior that we don't model, we need to at least be honest enough to say, "What I'm telling you is the right thing and I messed up." We need to at least be honest enough to admit our mistakes and not to send mixed messages to the children,

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“Oh, I say this but I’m sneaking around and it’s o.k.” I think that with your coach smoking, your coach had an opportunity to say, “This is an addiction and I messed up and what I am telling you is right.” I don’t know what happened with the coach, but we, as parents and adults who work with children, need to try to walk the walk and talk the talk so that they match.



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## **GRADES, LABELING AND SCHOOL SUCCESS/FAILURE**

What about the idea of good grades? Adults are interested in their own children and the children in their children's classrooms getting "good grades." Any ideas or stories or thoughts about that?

I think most kids want to succeed. I think there is a small percentage of kids that truly don't care. But what the expectations are at home is really going to vary from family to family.

**Do you think children ever fail on purpose?**

Sometimes, as far as grades are concerned.

I think there are a variety of reasons why some children do not try to do better in school. For some it might be a cry for help, "Here, look at me." I think that most kids, the vast majority of kids, want to succeed and want to learn. How we as teachers and parents go about doing that has a lot of bearing on how long they continue to want to learn.

Some children may think it's cool not to study.

### **Detrimental Effects of Labeling**

I have a stepdaughter. Her parents divorced when she was in kindergarten. The divorce was very difficult for her. She had trouble doing whatever the children were doing in kindergarten. The teacher said, "with the kind of family you come from, it is no wonder you are too stupid to learn." This little kindergartner failed kindergarten. When she was in fourth grade every time she was asked to do something that was slightly difficult she would say, "I'm too stupid to learn. I'm too stupid." That was all we heard. We had her tested and the results were fine. We laid the results in front of

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her, “Look at this, there are 94 math questions and you got 92 right. We say you are not stupid.” She had that negative image of herself, and she still tries to use it when something difficult comes up in school, this “I’m too stupid to learn.”

I had forgotten about something that had happened to our daughter in the eighth grade. She has not ever been a real good math student. That just happened not to be one of her better subjects. This year she really went round and around and around with the math teacher. My husband Sean, a teacher, tried to support the teacher and would say, “Well just work a little harder.” We worked with her. Finally she came home one day and said, “My teacher wants a conference with you all.” She said, “I had a few words with him. He sent me to the board to work out a problem and then in front of the class he said, ‘There is no need to ask you to do that, Martha. You’re too stupid to do math.’” When we went to see the teacher he said, “Well, Sean, what are you doing here?” Sean said, “You sent for us.” “No, I didn’t send for you.” Sean replied, “Oh, yes, you did. We’ve come about our daughter Martha.” I looked at him and I said, “Do you have Martha M. in your class?” He said, “Well, yes.” He looked at Sean and he said, “No, that’s your daughter, Sean?” Sean said, “Yes, she is our daughter.” I looked at him and said, “I hardly think she would have asked us to come for a conference if you hadn’t asked.” That was probably one of the worst experiences our child has had to this day. She is 35. Two years ago she finally realized that she could balance a checkbook and can do math. These are horrid stories that show how a teacher’s lack of consideration can destroy a child’s sense of self.

## **Success: Effort vs. Ability**

Most kids in this country, the vast majority of them, equate academic achievement with ability instead of effort, when in fact it is effort that is more positively related with academic achievement. I think this perception can be especially hurtful in the middle level years when children are feeling like they are failing anyway. Their bodies are doing all these weird things. “Yesterday, I had seven best friends and today I don’t have any. I had a girlfriend yesterday, but

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she likes somebody else today.” It is a real confusing world for them, and I think we can help middle level kids with their learning when we keep emphasizing that it is work and effort that is more distinctly related to academic achievement. Most adults feel that way too, by the way.

Labeling is probably one of the most researched educational phenomenon. So is the idea of grouping and tracking. Children know by the time they are five, whether they are in the high group, the middle group, or the low group. By the time you get them in eighth grade, in the middle school, they know what label they have been given. But there again, it reinforces the notion that it is ability, not work and effort that makes a difference in being successful.

### **Sibling Effects**

My friends’ daughter is enrolled in the governor’s school. She has a younger brother who is going to high school this year. He wants to go to the governor’s school too, but he didn’t make it and is having a real rough time with that.

There’s nothing much worse than to have a sister that precedes you who is very strong academically.

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## REFLECTIONS: ADVICE TO PARENTS AND ADULTS WHO LIVE AND WORK WITH EARLY ADOLESCENTS

What suggestion or words of wisdom do you have to share with parents, teachers, and others who live and work with children aged 10 to 14?

My one suggestion would be that if this is not something that they really want to do then they should choose something else to do. It is not fair to the children nor to themselves to feel that they are stuck with them.

That is right. They are not your own kids, and you don't have to be stuck with them.

I'm scared to death of kindergartners, but give me a seventh grader any day.

It is important to let them decide what they want to do and talk about, and you are there to provide the limits and support they need. You are there not to sanction, but to work with them to set realistic limits, to learn with them, and for them to know that you will step in if they are "out-of-bounds."

I really enjoy working with a group of teenagers at my church. It has been very successful because we decided to let them talk about anything that is of interest to them. We wanted them to be somewhere where they didn't have to compete with each other, where they didn't have to outdo one another, but where they could just be themselves, have a good time together, and learn to respect each other. That is what we have told them. "We want to learn to respect you, you to respect us, have fun and learn together as we go along." And I would say the same thing to other adults who work with this age group, "Run fast, if this is not something you feel comfortable doing." You do yourself an injustice to stay in an

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uncomfortable situation. There is a place for everybody. You just need to find the proper place to be ,and working with middle level children, may not be it.

If you really like to work with them you will be good at it. I think if you really like what you are doing, you'll get better and better all the time. It's just a natural kind of thing. You have to like it.

That's a good point. You'll get better and better. You may not be good right off when your children reach that age or when you walk into that sixth grade classroom the first day, but you'll get better because you're willing to stay and get better at it.

I would say to those people who want to work with a 10 to 14 age group of children, to be patient. An educator, James Hymes, talked about emotional development as a big part of children. It may be the most difficult domain in which we try to work to meet the needs of these children. My suggestion is, "Be patient, be patient, be patient."

You might tell them that we know they do not have all the answers to everything, every problem they face. But neither do we. We learn as we live and work with children.

The important thing is to be willing to learn and enjoy being with them.

I think that we are all put down here on earth to teach and to learn from each other, regardless of age. We aren't perfect. I think that I have a gift that may fill a hole in you, you have a gift that may fill a hole in me. We need to teach and learn from each other. None of us is perfect and children need to learn that they are not going to be either, but they can live and learn and try to be better.

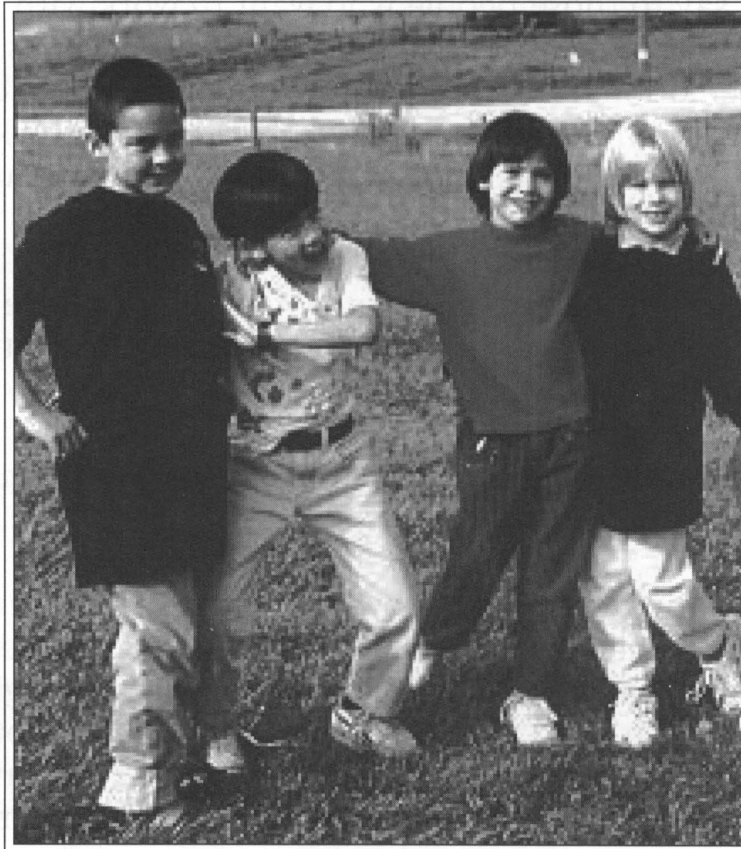
I think they are striving to be the perfect person, and I think it is hard for them to realize that is not going to happen. None of us are perfect, and they are not going to be perfect either.

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We all need to blow off that steam every once in a while and joke and laugh about ourselves, particularly students, and children in frustrating situations. Find some place to vent, but not at those children.

I will piggyback on that by saying find a support group, find the people who are doing the kinds of things you are with whom you can share and talk and exchange stories .

And laugh together.



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