

Sylvia Rimm, Ph.D.

Growing Up Too Fast: The Secret World of America's Middle Schoolers
New York, NY: Rodale (or Sylvia Rimm), 2005

Dr. Sylvia Rimm, a noted child psychologist and a clinical professor at Case School of Medicine in Cleveland, presents her findings from an extensive survey of more than 5,400 middle school kids and more than 300 focus groups aimed at uncovering issues confronting today's American middle schoolers. From her discoveries, she concludes that today's kids are facing difficult, adult decisions younger than ever before. She provides sensible strategies for parenting middle school kids and offers sample conversations for speaking with kids about tough issues such as bullying, peer pressure, popularity, dating, drugs, alcohol, and terrorism. The book is divided into five sections: Development, Environments, Worries, Pressures, and Parenting Tweens.

Dr. Rimm begins the book by discussing Erikson's stages of psychological development and points out that through the course of recent years middle childhood has been shortened, while adolescence has lengthened. In many cases, middle schools have replaced junior high schools and may begin as early as the fourth grade. In addition, some researchers hypothesize that children today are undergoing puberty at an earlier age than past generations. Proposed possible influencing factors are better nutrition, lifestyle and cultural changes, exposure to chemicals in the living environment, obesity, the use of infant formula containing soy, and early exposure to sexuality. Some of the observable effects of these changes are an earlier interest in the opposite sex, earlier push for independence, lessened years of compliance and learning of skills and information, and an earlier initiation of some developmental tasks of young adulthood, such as sex and intimacy. Parents are encouraged to stay connected with their tweens as they enter puberty and make time to talk and listen to them.

In the last chapter of this section, Dr. Rimm discusses gender stereotypes and sexual orientation. She shares her findings on how girls and boys describe themselves, the different activities they engage in, their career interests, and their expectations for the future. She also discusses homosexuality and the responsibilities parents and educators have in addressing this topic with their tweens. Readers may differ with some of the viewpoints expressed in this chapter.

In the next section of the book, Dr. Rimm suggests that the environment middle schoolers face today may be similar to what high school students faced just a decade or two ago with regards to sexual activity, tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. In her survey, a startling percentage of fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders reported that it was easy to get cigarettes, beer, and marijuana. Participation in community and school activities, parental involvement, and school prevention programs can make a difference in preventing substance abuse. The fact that many of today's youth are much more immersed in technology and media than in their communities and extracurricular activities presents a cause for concern. Dr. Rimm suggests that parents and schools encourage tweens' involvement in hobbies, sports, and extracurricular activities.

The occurrence of sex and violence in movies, music, and media is all too common. Regardless of limits parents may set, tweens are being exposed to a culture saturated with sex, violence, and an emphasis on fashion and appearance. Parents have a responsibility to not only set guidelines, but to also discuss culture and societal messages with their tweens. The media is only one source

young people may turn to for role models. It is critical they be exposed to positive role models that may include celebrities, parents, other relatives, teachers, friends, coaches, religious leaders, and even individuals from history.

Chapters 8 through 12 focus on the worries and pressures facing middle schoolers today. Among the top tween concerns that prevail within the walls of middle schools are bullying, violence, terrorism, and the pressure to be popular. Dr. Rimm presents identifying factors of bullies and victims and provides practical tips for tweens dealing with bullies. She also devotes a chapter to addressing tweens' fear of terrorism, which she suggests could be attributed to increased news reports of violence, murder, and terrorist attacks. She offers recommendations for preventing violence and helping kids during fearful times. She also provides valuable insight about determinants of popularity that tweens identified and the pressures they feel concerning fashion, friends, weight, and achievement.

In closing, Dr. Rimm encourages parents to be proactive in their kids' lives and to not underestimate the power of the influence they have. She provides techniques that can help parents prevent their children's underachievement and promote healthy development, positive relationships, and appropriate empowerment.

Key Points:

- Today's youth have a headstart on adolescence. The tween years have been redefined to include ages 8 to 14, whereas in past generations it has been 10 to 14.
- "Adolescents are initiating some of the developmental tasks of young adulthood, like sex and intimacy, long before they have mastered finding their own identities." (p. 5)
- Middle school students have neither the cognitive nor the emotional maturity to cope with the power and intensity of sexual involvement.
- Research confirms that kids who are active in community and extracurricular activities are less likely to become involved in high-risk activities.
- Sex and violence in music, movies, and media do influence behavior and attitudes toward such topics.
- According to Dr. Rimm's survey results, fears of terrorism and pressure to be popular tied as middle school students' top concerns.
- Parents can make a great difference in their kids' choices and behaviors by stating their opinions, establishing clear limits, fostering good relationships, and setting positive examples.
- Three variables increase the likelihood that children will emulate the behaviors they observe: nurturance as a special warmth by an adult, similarities between a child and an adult, and perceptions of an adult's power.