

Safe Schools for the Roller Coaster Years

Structuring middle schools with adolescents' cognitive and psychological needs in mind creates a secure space for learning.

Linda Inlay

The “roller coaster years” is an apt descriptor of adolescence. One minute, a 7th grade girl is sweet and cooperative, and the next minute she’s immersed in high drama because she doesn’t like how she looks. A 6th grader no longer wants to hold her father’s hand in public. An 8th grade boy, once a model student, is now more concerned about fitting in with the popular crowd.

As the director of River School, a small middle school in Napa, California, and a mother of two, I have encountered many behaviors like those described above. Changes taking place in adolescents’ brains, even more than the obvious physical changes, are the catalyst for such dramatic ups and downs. To give adolescents a safe track to roll through these years undamaged, educators need to look at the emotional and psychological needs that come with this intense brain development. By attending to these needs, we can create safe schools that will enhance students’ capacity to learn.

The Need to Experiment

Key parts of adolescents’ brains develop at different rates. The brain’s emotional centers surge into hyperdrive long before the “judgment seat”—the prefrontal cortex, which mitigates emotional ups and downs—has matured. In terms of their brains, adolescents are still more like children



Photos courtesy of Linda Inlay

than young adults, although the appearance of physical maturity tricks us into thinking otherwise. It is not until age 25 that humans’ prefrontal cortex matures and the capacity to make sound judgments is fully developed. Possibly this is why the highest car insurance premiums are charged to males under age 25.

During adolescence the brain’s capacity to make connections nearly doubles, which encourages lots of experimentation between ages 11 and 25 (such as long hair in my generation and green hair today). During this time

the brain is “hardwired,” as the neural networks for certain tendencies and habits are established. After adolescence, the brain’s capacity for connection returns to normal. The neural connections established during the teen years are kept intact and connections that were not used disappear. As Brownlee and colleagues put it,

Teenagers are choosing what their brains are going to be good at—learning right from wrong, responsibility or impulsiveness, thinking or video games. (Brownlee, Hotinski, Pailthorp, Ragan, & Wong, 1999)

Creating a School That Supports Adolescents

The Need for Autonomy

Keeping in mind what I know of how the adolescent brain develops, I have structured the River School to help our students develop a sense of autonomy and responsibility as well as personal connectedness. In this stage, adolescents are trying on different personas to figure out “who they are.” Analytical thinking also starts in adolescence and leads to questioning authority. Teenagers begin to separate emotionally from parents (no more hand-holding and lots of rolling of the eyes) and to develop their own unique identities—a crucial process in becoming psychologically healthy, independent adults.

When adolescent students feel safe to be themselves yet also connect to their peers, they are more grounded. This emotional safety provides a foundation that prevents narcissism on the one hand and reduces vulnerability to peer pressure on the other.

Rudolf Dreikurs (1971) wrote about the challenges of educating students during a period when social institutions were moving from a reliance on autocratic relationships to a focus on democratic relationships. I agree with Dreikurs that the old paradigm “Do as I say because I’m the adult” does not produce happy, responsible young people at home or in school. Nor does the permissive model, which produces what Shaw (2003) calls an epidemic of indulged children. When adults follow the autocratic model, children are passive; in the permissive paradigm, children have too much inappropriate power and become selfish and arrogant. Dreikurs offered another way to relate with young people: democratic parenting and democratic education in schools. This approach encourages adults and young people to treat each other with mutual respect and regard.

In keeping with this philosophy, teachers at River School provide a safe place where students can practice

making good *and* poor choices within appropriate boundaries. Middle school students need the chance to make a lot of mistakes; that’s part of the experimentation and limit-testing important to adolescence (Mackenzie, 2001). Child psychiatrist Jay Giedd has observed,

I see kids who are cracking up because of the stress of the workload and because they see only one way to success, to getting a good job. They don’t take many real risks because they are afraid. But maybe because of that, they have not learned to make their own decisions.



That worries me. I think kids need to learn life’s lessons. . . . They need to take risks, to make some mistakes. (quoted in Strauch, 2004)

In an environment that feels safe, mistakes can powerfully teach young people about choices and consequences, about freedom and responsibility. When students at our school lie about bad choices they have made, they invariably tell me they did so because they “didn’t want to get in trouble.” These students are willing to accept consequences for their mistakes, but they will lie if they fear having someone get angry at them. When human beings feel safe, they use their cerebral cortex rather than the “fight or flight” part of their brain, and they can better reflect on mistakes.

Instead of showing anger and disapproval when adolescents behave in undesirable ways, educators should guide teens to reflect on their behavior. Teenagers can then focus on themselves

and the choices they made rather than worry about defending themselves against adult anger. At River School, teachers and student mentors lead students through the following reflective process, which trains them to make better choices and accept responsibility for their mistakes:

- Acknowledge your mistake instead of blaming, lying, or making excuses.
- “Clean it up” with those involved.
- Accept the consequence for the mistake.
- Learn from your behavior so that you are less likely to make the mistake again.
- Forgive yourself for the mistake and move on.

Richard DuFour talks about the “loose-tight” leadership style of principals in successful professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The same leadership style can be applied to middle schools, with the school climate being “tight” in the sense of having clear expectations and consequences but “loose” in terms of allowing students to make appropriate choices.

As River School has become more democratic and respectful in relating with our students, we have found that some students’ parents may be too autocratic while others may be too indulgent. Through parenting classes and conferences, we educate parents about the possibility of shifting more control to teenagers and letting teens learn from their mistakes through trial and error. A partnership of parents, teachers, and students has been very effective in helping students develop a strong sense of self and display personal and social responsibility.

The Need to Belong—Yet Be Yourself

Adolescents vacillate between two psychological needs—need for a sense of self and need for a sense of belonging (Adler, 1927/1992). Psychologist H. Scott Glenn (1989) believes that all human beings have three needs that help nurture both a sense of self and a sense of belonging: the need to be listened to,

the need to be taken seriously, and the need to make a contribution.

At River School we attempt to fulfill these needs by organizing small listening groups, each composed of a teacher advisor and several students who meet regularly to share their concerns and successes. Students look forward to these sessions and often carry on even when the teacher is absent. Besides providing a safe place to vent, listening groups encourage students to speak up for themselves, to think critically and develop opinions,

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We also work hard to develop in students a sense of community and belonging through events that unite 6th, 7th, and 8th graders, such as "The Amazing Race" scavenger hunt in San Francisco. We team each 6th grade class with a group of 7th and 8th graders to form a "family" that meets at least once a month for community-building activities. Before we started this "family" program, many 6th graders were afraid of the 8th graders who tried to connect with them; the 8th graders felt rebuffed and gave up. Now the 6th grade students make friends with the older students and show more confidence, speaking up at school meetings, for example. We do not have a pecking order by grade level.

When our students feel emotionally safe, when they can walk down the halls unafraid of being teased, when they have people they can talk to about their concerns, and when adults nurture that climate of safety, students respond better to academic challenges.

The Need for Personal Meaning

We have learned over the years that unless curriculum is presented in ways that middle school students can connect with personally, they will forget what

they have learned within a short time (National Middle Schools Association, 2002). For example, one teacher at River School helped students relate to the history of the American Revolutionary War by comparing the colonists' demands for autonomy and independence to adolescents' need to be heard and to have their rights considered by their parents.

Another way to help students connect to their learning is to have them develop their own questions to investigate within broad parameters set

by the teachers. For example, when teachers at River School initiated a unit on cultures that have developed alongside rivers, they posed the overarching question, "How does geography affect culture and how do cultures affect geography?" Students then thought of subquestions that they were eager to investigate:

- How does geography shape the religions and beliefs of a culture?
- Does having less make people care more?
- What comforts do people take for granted that make them less concerned about the earth?

We also help students at River School find meaning by tapping into their need to make a contribution. We encourage 8th graders in particular to contribute to creating a supportive student culture at the school by providing peer mediation, speaking at conferences, participating in a panel at a parenting class, hosting visitors, or mentoring struggling 6th graders. Our 6th and 7th graders act as ambassadors for the school, creating presentations (including one performed with music) to share at local elementary schools. Such activities help students see that they matter at the school, lessen the attitude of entitlement and disdain that adolescents often display, and heighten

their confidence and self-esteem.

When middle schoolers relate with adults and peers in mutually respectful ways, when they are not afraid to take intellectual risks, and when they are presented with a challenging and personally meaningful curriculum, they thrive academically and become engaged with their school community, laying the foundation for engagement in the larger community.

I witnessed the results of the culture of safety and engagement we foster at River School on one particular last day of school. After the last bell, the whole school lingered in the courtyard signing yearbooks, saying goodbye, hugging, and crying. Parents entering the courtyard were amazed at students' depth of caring and their uncharacteristic response to the start of summer. Whereas most adults remember middle school as one of the most uncomfortable and awkward passages in their lives, our students recall the River School fondly. **EL**

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