

# Disconnected High School Students Parenting Midadolescents

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Our conviction is that it is impossible to understand our kids, and much less parent, in today's culture without taking into account the reality and uniqueness of a brand-new stage of the process: midadolescence. Early and late adolescence have been with us for several decades, but as they both were stretched as adolescence lengthened, they reached the point where neither could be stretched any further. Somewhere in the middle 1990s, this created a whole new developmental stage of life we call midadolescence.<sup>2</sup>

Stage of adolescence	Begins at age	Ends at age
Early adolescence	11/12	14/15
Midadolescence	14/15	19/21
Late adolescence	19/21	Mid-20s

## How a Midadolescent Responds to Systemic Abandonment

In chapter 6 we talked in general about systemic abandonment and especially how it has contributed to the lengthy and isolated process that adolescence has become. We described how as societies around the world have become increasingly fragmented, with everybody pushed and pulled in multiple directions, there has been a subtle yet steady

erosion of our collective commitment to proactively assimilating our children and adolescents into adult society. This culture-wide lack of intentional support and guiding nurture has created an innate insecurity in the souls of our kids. These are examples of the kinds of experiences and memories that midadolescents have shared with us:

- the coach who yelled at the clumsy eight-year-old for not getting the catcher's equipment on fast enough
- the teacher who taped the talkative first grader's head to his desk to get him to shut up
- the Sunday school teacher who kicked the girl out of the class on Jesus' love because she was chewing gum and playing with her hair

### **Egocentric Abstraction: The Defining Characteristic of Midadolescence**

While high school students have the capability for abstract thinking and relationships, they feel so alone and vulnerable that they are forced into an *egocentric abstraction* that is the defining characteristic of midadolescence. Midadolescents are *neither* concrete in their thinking and reflection *nor* able to objectively process the multiple factors that have to be taken into account as we learn how to accept and evaluate others, warts and all. The midadolescent is smack in the middle of the tightrope, where they know there is no going back to the safety of childhood, yet the end of this transitional journey is not in sight. The late adolescent ability to abstractly deal with the world is not a fully developed skill for the midadolescent. They have the ability to think and reflect on life and others, but they do not yet have the ability to rise above the immediacy of their experience. The pain is so raw, the daunting nature of the lengthy task before them so discouraging, and the intense sense of aloneness and vulnerability so palpable that the only way a midadolescent can deal with their life experience so far is through *egocentric abstraction*. To be blunt, a midadolescent is at least somewhat aware that their life impacts others even as others impact them, *but they don't have the resources or energy to care*.

### **Building the Scaffolding for a Lifelong Faith**

Here are four faith-building strategies that can help move your child toward a growing faith even while wading through the mire of midadolescence.

**First, encourage a personal ownership of their faith.** Every child eventually needs to make the leap from mimicking their parents' faith to taking on their own. This is among the most difficult of roads for parents, because this is where we ultimately have to sit back and allow the process to unfold.

**Second, do what you can to encourage them to ask hard questions of life and faith and to not be afraid to deeply analyze and explore what they have been taught their whole lives.** Your child may have been a model Sunday school kid in kindergarten, an enthusiastic leader in sixth grade, a "student leader" in ninth, and yet by the end of their junior year they may tell you, "I don't believe in that stuff anymore." It is possible and

even likely that it is not Jesus or even Christianity they are rejecting but rather something as amorphous as “the church,” which is to them a monolithic, heartless, faceless institution that does not care much about them. Crisis and struggle are a prerequisite of growth, so without pushing too hard, don’t be afraid to allow and even encourage your child to seek the truth with honesty and openness.

**The third strategy is to empower your child to put their faith into action.** What it takes to win the hearts and souls of hurt kids today is to strip away the fluff and excess of cultural faith and head back into the core of the gospel: giving ourselves away for the sake of others. Unfortunately, the Bible’s words about sacrifice, consistent lifestyle, mercy, and love for the poor and the needy have been pushed into the background of our understanding of faith.

**Lastly, the most effective thing we can do to foster spiritual maturity in our children is to integrate them into adult relationships in the body of Christ.** Because midadolescence developed due to our collective neglect and abandonment, we must undo its effects by bringing adults and kids together. Young people should be allowed and encouraged to participate in adult Sunday school and Bible study classes, go on men’s and women’s retreats, and serve on ministry and service teams with adults. The more your child feels that they are part of something bigger than themselves and that they are included in not only a family but the family of God, the more they will allow themselves to be drawn into a level of faith that will strengthen and lead them for the rest of their lives.

### **Action Points:**

- Have you ever heard of midadolescence before? If not, what questions would you like to explore further in order to understand midadolescents themselves better?
  - How do you respond to Chap and Dee’s assertion that kids have been systemically abandoned by our culture? When you evaluate your community, your church, and even your own ministry with kids, what specific evidence can you find that abandonment might be taking place? Write down a few questions to ask some of the kids in your ministry and start a dialog this week about ways kids are experiencing abandonment and its effects.
  - If you are a parent and/or a youth worker, what rings true in Chap and Dee’s description of egocentric abstraction as a central feature of midadolescence? What other parent or youth worker could you get together with this week to discuss this concept and how it plays out in your kids or the kids you minister among?
  - Chap and Dee set out four faith-building tips for parents of midadolescents above. Of those four, which do you feel like you promote best? Which one needs some focused attention in order to nurture kids’ faith more deeply?
1. Encourage personal ownership of faith.
  2. Promote questions and exploration of faith concepts.
  3. Empower them to put their faith into action.
  4. Integrate them into adult discipleship relationships.

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2. Copyright restrictions prohibit reprinting this entire chapter, so some of these concepts have been significantly shortened. In order to read the rest of Chap and Dee's thoughts on parenting midadolescents, please see the full version of this article in Chapter 10 of *Disconnected*. [[↔](#)]

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