

Why middle childhood is so critical

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When it comes to ‘vulnerable’ ages for children, we tend to think of infancy or adolescence. There is, however, another period in children’s lives which brings significant challenges: ‘middle childhood’.

The recurring theme children face at this age is change. Yet the changes affecting middle childhood centre less on ‘growth’ and more on children’s developing social and emotional worlds. The first big change is that children in middle childhood spend around half as much time with their parents as they do in early childhood, while the time they spend with other children and alone increases significantly.

However, this shifting dynamic of children’s interactions coincides with a number of other developments. Firstly, children at this age become much more aware of themselves in relation to their peers, with the result that ‘fitting in’ takes on a vital significance. And, with greater exposure to potential like-with-like comparisons, children are more prone to judge themselves against other children, leading to new feelings of competition, jealousy or inadequacy.

For many children, their primary school class teacher becomes an important source of stability. Thus, the move from primary to secondary school brings a loss of the continuity and security this contact represents, and this challenge can be particularly acute for children with unstable home lives. Being both new and the youngest in an unfamiliar environment can add to feelings of vulnerability, as can the loss of close primary school friends.

Middle childhood is also a period when children are particularly likely to experience parental separation or upheavals in their family life. Although this upheaval can produce better long-term outcomes for children, the short-term impact, as well as the possible negative prelude to separation, can be very difficult.

At the same time, supporting children’s needs in middle childhood can become increasingly difficult, particularly for parents with their own problems. Poverty can affect children’s quality of life at school, by limiting their chances to participate, while parental support (for example helping with homework, reading together and instilling motivation through expectations) is a very significant contributor to children’s academic success. Children whose parents are less able to provide this support may find themselves at a disadvantage.

As children increasingly judge themselves against their peers, any sources of difference are worrying. As a result, any marker of ‘difference’ can have an amplified impact on their lives. Being disabled, or having a ‘different’ family structure, such as being adopted or fostered, can become a worry for children at this age, by making them feel abnormal at a time when notions of normality have taken on a new importance.

The development of a child's self-esteem during this period also affects their resilience. Children suffering abuse may begin to internalise it through feelings of shame and self-blame. The new significance of self-esteem can also relate to feelings about being adopted, as children start to question their value if, in their minds, their biological parents gave them up.

Unfortunately, research shows that negative experiences at this age can have long-lasting detrimental effects on children. The formative years of middle childhood are highly significant for outcomes in later life, ranging from mental health problems, to aggressive and delinquent behaviour and engagement in criminal activity. Cases of adolescent aggression can be traced back to formative experiences in middle childhood, such as those affecting self-esteem or family stability. And the likelihood of drug use has also been linked to characteristics developed in middle childhood, such as behaviour problems. In short, experiences in middle childhood can significantly hamper a child's future.

To avoid long-lasting detrimental outcomes, supportive adults are vital. Children in this age range inevitably spend less time supervised by adults, but it is fundamentally important that adults are available for children. Parents and professionals can both help to foster positive outcomes, for example by arranging shared care giving, or by providing dependable external advice and support.

All children in middle childhood face quietly dramatic transformations which can be distressing, and it is impossible to protect them from every difficult experience. But for vulnerable children, access to responsive adults who are aware of how children are coping in their daily lives is a prerequisite for good outcomes. Paying plenty of attention to children's needs in middle childhood is hugely important.