

5038

Middle-school years critical for many kids

A report from Children First documents problems facing students.

The middle school years can be toxic for children.

Disagree? Just think back on your own junior high era.

Kids this age can be brutal to one another. They're testing their boundaries, trying on adolescent personalities, figuring out how they fit in — or don't fit in.

That's made worse by availability of illegal drugs and the prevalence of TV as the contemporary baby sitter, filling in for working parents.

Middle school is the make-it or break-it time for many kids. This is when they solidify a positive social and academic foundation or veer off into troublesome activities.

Yet middle-schoolers have too little support. They enjoy neither the comfort and personal attention of elementary schools nor the wide-ranging academic opportunities of high schools.

That's one reason why a new report from Children First for Oregon is so valuable. It documents the problems facing children ages 8-13, especially those in middle schools, including:

- 26 percent of Oregon eighth-graders drank alcohol in the past month.

- 14 percent of eighth-graders used tobacco in the past month.

- 39 percent of middle-schoolers felt harassed at school.

- 13 percent of middle-schoolers had considered suicide last year, and 618 Oregon children ages 8-13 had attempted suicide in the last five years.

- 879 seventh- and eighth-graders dropped out of school in 1998-99.

For more information

You can contact Children First for Oregon at P.O. Box 14914, Portland, OR 97293; (503) 236-9754; fax, (503) 236-3048; www.childrenfirstfororegon.org.

Is the picture all bad? Certainly not.

Many middle-schoolers are blessed with outstanding teachers and school counselors — adults whom they trust, admire and can learn from.

Many schools, agencies, churches and other organizations offer high-quality after-school, evening and weekend activities for kids — and parenting classes for adults. More school boards are recognizing the value of increased academic, arts and sports programs to keep kids interested in middle school.

Those efforts are paying off. For example, drug and cigarette use among eighth-graders is declining.

But the leaders of Children First also point out that many efforts are misguided. Schools and community groups too often rely on anti-drug use and zero-tolerance and parenting programs that are politically popular but aren't backed up with measurable results.

The Children First report will provide a valuable service if it forces educators, community leaders and parents to focus on programs proved to work.

As a start, the Legislature and state Department of Education should provide financial incentives to schools that use research-tested discipline, academic, social-problem solving and substance abuse programs.

Middle school is a tough age. We owe it to our kids to pay more attention to helping them successfully pass through those years.

The Statesman Journal