

THE FAMILY: A VICTIM OR A WINNER IN RELATION TO THE SECONDARY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

Achieving academic success for middle school students is a real challenge today in Romania for teachers, parents, and children/adolescents alike. The particularities of the socio-economic-historical context are reflected in the daily lives of educational actors in stress, lack of time, lack of motivation, low patience, desire to do things quickly, to quickly achieve the proposed objectives. Achieving good results in school for grades V–VIII remains a difficult goal for many students, parents, and teachers in Romania today. Reorganizing the relationship between family and school could be a lifesaving strategy for the learning and development process of many children and adolescents.

Keywords: learning; development; performance; academic success; children; adolescents; digital generation; parents; teachers; middle school; victim family system; winning family system; interaction; effective communication; partnership; individual characteristics; age-related psychological characteristics; generational characteristics

About middle school years in Romania in the context of the digital generation

Romanians have always been concerned about their children. "I would do anything for my child!" is an old saying that still resonates with parents in Romania today. Boundless love and the desire to help their children be happy and follow a good path in life are still extremely important goals for parents in Romania today. Different generations: young adults, mature adults, and the elderly fight with the same tenacity to see their children or grandchildren healthy, happy, shining with joy, and achieving great things. Whether they follow an educational path in a public or private educational institution, parents who are extremely connected to their children often have only one desire: to help them become valuable adults! They work hard, pay a lot, and do everything in their power to see their children grow up beautifully, on a good educational path that will

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develop them excellently, both cognitively, emotionally, and socio- relationally. During middle school, they all discover, step by step, the characteristics of a digital generation that is extremely fast-paced and eager to learn and assert itself, to be considered seriously from a very young age. It is the generation of "I can do it!" and "I know everything!", "I discover, learn from experience, and master the world!" This is a generation of children who pose great challenges to adults in the process of growing up, educating, and personal development! It is a generation with personality, which, in order to be mastered and guided on the path of knowledge, needs clear benchmarks and directions that are proven, accepted, and well understood by children. It is a generation that quickly notices the congruence or incongruence between what they are told or proposed and what they can actually do to achieve good, effective, or adaptive results. An empathetic generation, focused on human values of cooperation and mutual aid, always connected and eager to learn as quickly and with as little effort as possible. A generation that seems to enjoy life, interacting with others, but also learning and navigating the internet quickly, developing digital skills and structuring digital thinking, using technology as a way of life, of connecting with others and of learning. They are focused on skill building and less on content (not "what it is" but "how it is" and "what I need it for"). They want to research, think, and solve problems. They take risks, develop entrepreneurial, coordination, learning, and communication skills, as well as innovative and influencer abilities as a result of multidirectional physical, mental, and sociocultural maturation. They show maximum perseverance in achieving goals that enhance their well-being. They are very anchored in the "here and now," discovering the world through all their senses, so they need to experiment. If the significant adults in children's lives - parents and teachers - are aware of these generational, age-related, and individual psychological characteristics and structure the learning and development process accordingly, they will certainly have reliable partners in children throughout the educational process.

The Romanian education system, during middle school, is characterized by a large amount of study material. The curricula are extremely heavy, the information is extremely dense, and it seems as if it has not been selected based on the criteria of essential knowledge and applicability in everyday life. Of course, teachers face the great challenge of selecting the material to be taught to children and organizing the learning content in a thorough manner and developing skills that ensure the easy implementation of the knowledge acquired. It is also the teacher who will assess the quality of the retention and use of the content taught and the implementation of the skills acquired by the children. Their strategy will be successful to the extent that they have a thorough knowledge of the subject they teach, but also of the generational, psychological, age-related, and individual characteristics of the students in their classes. The latter can only

be discovered through a deep commitment and desire to know and support each student and their family of origin. The positive results achieved by the children will be motivational factors for further learning and development for the students, which will bring satisfaction to both the teacher and the children. Negative results often have a demotivating effect on the continued involvement of middle school children in the learning and development process carried out in school. Dissatisfaction among children, parents, and teachers is not long in coming.

The fact that in Romania we have printed textbooks and workbooks, digital textbooks, collections, and workbooks, or digital learning challenges is an extremely good thing. Diversity is loved by these children, and neuroscience teaches us that it is also extremely useful for thorough learning. Printed books and notebooks can be used successfully for individual or group learning, for developing good reading skills and organizing learning activities. The logical arrangement of main ideas on the page, solving mathematical problems, and collecting and handwriting essential rules that must be memorized in order to operate with them are actions that stimulate children's brains for thorough learning. Furthermore, personalizing learning activities can be done very easily with the help of technology, providing children with the necessary material to deepen their understanding and memorization of the content to be learned, transferring it from their working memory to their long-term memory. A balanced face-to-face and digital education that considers individual, psychological, age, and generational characteristics could lead to the successful achievement of the proposed objectives: the cognitive, emotional, and socio-relational development of middle school students.

About the family system and its challenges during middle school years

The family is the sacred place where a child is born and grows up. The family is a biological but also a socio-cultural conglomerate, a system in which each part is dependent on everything that happens in the small and large systemic family (the nuclear family and the extended family). Life principles, beliefs, and moral values are passed down through the generations and contribute substantially to the formation and development of the adolescent if the relationships within this conglomerate are positive and solid. Significant individuals in the extended family and nuclear family become role models for children. The interest shown in learning activities and school performance by significant adults becomes an important benchmark for juniors in terms of their relationship with school and learning activities - development in general.

A healthy parent-teenager alliance promotes harmonious development. Trust, shared love, and unconditional acceptance of the teenager by his or her parents make him or her compliant with many of the

educational proposals that they address to him or her, in accordance with their own values, moral beliefs, and family principles of life. A united parent-child relationship supports healthy growth and academic achievement. Even if they encounter difficulties, children know that they have parents around them who support and help them. Most of the time, parents have a good relationship with teachers and act to provide support in line with the advice or guidance they receive from them. Frequently, the parent-student-teacher team manages to overcome obstacles in the learning-development process and give the child/adolescent confidence that any problem can be solved. Together, they manage to overcome any difficulty. The child achieves the desired academic success, is valued by the significant adults around them, is aware of their new declarative and procedural acquisitions, feels proud of themselves and confident in their own strengths, and is willing to study further to repeat history. Everyone is satisfied and happy! The family becomes a winning system, and the teacher enjoys the satisfaction that his work brings him. The school is also proud of the students' achievements.

However, a damaged relationship in which the parent discredits the child/adolescent and allies with a teacher who attributes academic failure to the student's poor or uninterested background, divides the family system, increases the child/adolescent's defense mechanisms for preserving their inner balance, and disrupts the learning-development process. The student feels alone, cornered, and experiences negative emotions towards their parents, teacher, and school in general. Motivation for academic activity decreases as feelings of guilt and distrust in their own resources increase. Conflicts within the family system intensify, and the family becomes the victim of a relationship poorly managed by the educational actors within the school. The breakdown of family relationships is the first step towards losing control over the child's development and the emergence of academic failures. Poor grades, lack of motivation for learning activities, apathy, depression, self-blame, attention instability, anxiety, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence in one's own abilities are not long in coming. Disputes between parents who begin to feel a loss of control over their child's academic development become more frequent, the parental relationship deteriorates, and the marital relationship becomes dysfunctional. The parent-child relationship becomes increasingly fragile, and the home is no longer perceived as a loving place to live. Therefore, the family is at an impasse, and perhaps only a contractual relationship with an educational psychologist can help it restore a new adaptive family balance in which every member is a winner. The school teacher also suffers, as the child becomes increasingly unmanageable and difficult to guide on the path to academic success. Dissatisfaction with the work done quickly sets in, antipathy towards the child may increase, and more or less conscious reactions of rejection can cause various emotional disorders in the child/adolescent, which further

makes difficult the learning and development activities. It is a situation in which everyone loses and becomes a victim of a poorly managed relational system.

Age-specific challenges for children and parents during middle school years may include:

- Maintaining motivation for knowledge and learning-development activities;
- Shaping self-identity and gender identity by building self-confidence and self-esteem;
- Creating and maintaining a productive family environment for the development of middle school adolescents.

Maintaining motivation for knowledge and learning-development activities is achieved through:

- Proper school management: efficient study, focused learning, multiple activities, productive combinations (doing homework with light, rhythmic background music, no words, no checking messages on the phone), setting realistic goals, organization, diet, exercise, and sleep (in accordance with the child's physiological rhythms; we cannot ask a child to be fully involved in activities that start at 8 AM and end at 8 PM or 1 AM);
- Managing extracurricular activities and organizing free time;
- Managing relationships with teachers, congeners —classmates and friends;
- Efficient use of notes and textbooks through good management of learning activities (setting short- and long-term goals, active learning, highlighting, colors, great ideas, plans and review outlines, applying learned knowledge, etc.);
- Online study guided by an adult, the classroom teacher;
- Teamwork/project work carried out efficiently in class;
- Managing school anxiety and stress – using a planner to plan the day well;
- Achieving desired performance;
- Outlining a path for development and personal transformation (where I am and where I want to be).

However, for all of this to be properly implemented by middle school students with the support of their parents, it is necessary for the partnership between the family and the school, as well as the teachers involved in raising and educating children, to function effectively.

The family: A victim or a winner in its relationship with the school during middle school years

Middle school years bring with them a lot of challenges and solutions for teachers, students, and parents to coexist harmoniously during this extremely complicated period in terms of age-specific psychological characteristics (11/12–14/15 years old). Students still need guidance and clear benchmarks in order to organize themselves and perform well in their learning activities. The leading role in building this partnership is, of course, played by the teacher, with their knowledge and wealth of experience. The receptiveness and willingness of children and parents to build an excellent relationship is also extremely important. For a solid partnership from the outset, teachers should clearly communicate their expectations as teachers and listen carefully to the expectations of children and parents. It would be desirable for them to be curious to learn as much as possible about the academic needs and desires of children and parents and to try to take them into account in building relationships with them. It is important for students to feel comfortable at school, to understand that they are safe and that teachers, in close collaboration with parents, will support them in discovering that middle school can be a wonderful and motivating time for extraordinary discoveries and learning activities.

At middle school age, children need to discover the story of a new and different start to school with self-confidence, curiosity, and a great interest in learning. They need continuity to maintain their self-confidence and self-esteem in order to build a good relationship with their new teachers and classmates. Therefore, teachers should review the school curricula from previous years and refresh important content that students have acquired during those years with them. Students need to feel good about themselves from the very first days of school. When teachers test previous knowledge, they should first review the information exactly as it was given to the children in previous school years, without introducing new terms or content that they have not been taught. This could make them feel vulnerable and help them develop defense mechanisms such as withdrawal, avoidance, and feelings of shame for not knowing, and their motivation to learn will be severely affected. The teacher-student relationship will also be burdened with negative emotions and will be affected right from the start.

Children still have concrete thinking and a great need for guidance. Teachers should provide them with learning experiences that help them easily understand new content or subjects. Write with them on the board, legibly, at a pace that all children can keep up with, summarizing the concepts and providing them with notions that they can remember, integrate into their knowledge base, and easily use in the practical applications they carry out together in class. Students will be fascinated, become interested, and love their teachers because they value them and help them make progress and maintain their self-confidence and self-esteem. No fears, no

inferiority complexes at school! Parents are happy that their children enjoy going to school, and the family thus becomes a winning system in its relationship with the school. All these things must be maintained throughout middle school.

Using technology in the classroom in moderation fits perfectly with the characteristics of the digital generation of children. A laptop on each desk, connected to the school network, an account for each child to use the chosen learning platform, one or two tutors assigned to each account, often the mother or father or both, are essential elements for successful study at home and at school. The teacher can log into each child's account and monitor what they are working on and how they are working, beyond the guidance they can give directly to each student in class. They can suggest links for exploration, work with groups of children on projects with various themes in class to develop both digital and teamwork skills, mutual support and the generation and selection of ideas according to given criteria, the concrete division of tasks and their effective completion. Digital skills for using Artificial Intelligence in a truly useful way can be developed in school lessons and practiced over time in the educational institution but also at home for possible weekend assignments. A virtual library, specific to various disciplines or transdisciplinary, can also be set up and used over time for documentation and learning sequences. Differentiated classroom activities can also be achieved with the help of technology, as teachers can assign tasks to each child individually based on the declarative and procedural concepts that they need to learn more about. Corrections are made easily, electronically, and positive feedback, which is so necessary for this generation of children, can be given immediately. Everything remains on the learning platform, and parents can view their child's differentiated activities and progress at any time. Supplementing concrete study activities with books and workbooks with study activities in a digital environment strengthens the motivation of middle school adolescents to learn.

Children need to know what to learn, how to learn, and when to learn. Teachers need to guide them and learn with them in class, providing examples and giving them clear guidelines for learning at home. If they know what is expected of them, children will try to succeed and will be delighted by positive feedback from their classroom teacher. They will be grateful and will value their teachers!

Informing parents about the material covered and the learning activities assigned as homework to students can facilitate their careful involvement in monitoring the school-related responsibilities that children should assume. They could also point out any difficulties students might be having with their homework, which would allow the teacher to adjust the teaching-learning process at school. In this way, teacher-parent communication would be transparent and useful, supporting the consistent

involvement of children in the learning process, with positive effects for everyone. In Romania, unfortunately, only a small percentage of private schools have the technology necessary for easy communication with parents: "Google Classroom" or "Kinderpedia." Even so, private schools in Romania still lack well-defined educational policies that are implemented by all teachers and convey a unified picture of what is happening with children at school. As a result, even with big financial resources, families may become victims of a deficient relationship with the school environment to which their children belong. Unfortunately, in state schools, teachers can use their personal WhatsApp accounts if they wish, without a well-thought-out and implemented school policy to keep in touch with parents and have their genuine support in achieving educational goals. Therefore, the chaos created and the lack of monitoring of the choices children make in relation to the learning process can be found almost everywhere. This is also the reason why the two camps of adults, parents and teachers, are often in conflict. We therefore note the widespread establishment of neurotic behaviors at home and at school. In a digital age, with a generation of digital children, technology is being pushed aside, and the chaos created at home and at school dominates the lives of children who, by activating lasting defense mechanisms, practice what has become a national sport today: "escaping the adult world and taking refuge in the world of children" who raise themselves, according to principles discovered and implemented on their own through trial and error. They are all victims of an underfunded and poorly designed system. Children are lost to drugs, deep depression, and generalized anxiety, which prevent family systems from functioning properly. The family can thus become a victim of an ineffective relationship with the school environment during middle school years. When students fail to get good grades, teachers come and tell parents that the child is inattentive and uninterested, in other words, that the child is defective. The parent, in turn, relays what the child complains about at home, that they do not understand anything the teacher is teaching. The result is widespread dissatisfaction among teachers and parents, and children drift away from school, losing their motivation to learn, to be curious and attentive in class, labeling themselves as stupid anyway and telling themselves that there is no point in trying at school. Their attention is drawn to their phones, WhatsApp conversations, or the group of children outside who criticize the school system at every turn: "How many like us?!" Children are stolen by the street, they hate their parents and teachers, and they increasingly seek the company of their congeners, who are also victims of a school system that is not exactly well-designed.

Short-circuiting the learning process and distancing children from their parents and teachers also occurs as a result of serious errors in the mechanism of memorization and use of declarative and procedural knowledge by teachers. Immediate feedback on understanding newly taught

content is often an indicator of learning. This is a major trap for both teachers and students, as the material is stored in the working memory for only a short time. Frequent review and application of the essential concepts learned is the key to fixing the material being learned in long-term memory. Students will thus enrich their general and specific knowledge. They will have something to think about and will be able to relate the knowledge taught in all kinds of ways, working with the teacher or independently on all kinds of practical tasks or applications that meet the children's need to find out how the information they have learned is useful.

In order for test results to be motivating, it is essential that teachers provide a revision plan in advance, discuss it with their students, and recommend it as a learning guide. The plan will organize the children's thinking and help them connect the information they have learned. The knowledge will remain in their memory for a long time and will be easily accessible. Thorough learning is the guarantee of academic progress.

The threat of "flash tests" and their implementation creates panic, mental blocks, and rejection of learning content at this age. Most likely, low grades are perceived as an ugly reflection of personal vulnerabilities and undermine self-confidence. They contribute to the child's lack of motivation to learn and to the total rejection of the teacher and the subject taught. The teacher-student-parent relationship is compromised.

Creative lessons, structured like a story, or cross-disciplinary classes, well-thought-out and prepared assessments motivate children to achieve good academic results. It is absolutely necessary for teachers to guide parents by telling them how to help their children achieve good results in school. Clear directions can be given on what to do and how to support the child's learning. Parents need to be very clear about what their children are learning, how they should learn in order to perform well, and how long they should learn so that their assessment results are positive. All statistics show that parental involvement is the most important factor in academic performance at any age for children and adolescents.

Middle school students need emotional support. They do not yet dare to tell teachers that they have not understood, that something is unclear to them, or to contradict a teacher. The nonverbal language of students who are anxious, panicked, or completely disinterested, closely observed by teachers, should be an indicator that these children are no longer keeping up with the explanations. Something has escaped them or overwhelmed them, and they can no longer follow what the teacher is saying. They will feel guilty, maladjusted, exposed. They will be overwhelmed by these feelings and lose real contact with the teacher and the subject matter. Therefore, stopping the learning activities in time will allow the explanations to be resumed and the children to regain their attention and interest. The effort to learn will be supported by the fact that the teacher understood his

helplessness and stopped to help him. The teacher cared about the child and helped them overcome the difficult situation they were in. This attention to students strengthens the collaborative relationship with teachers and inspires feelings of gratitude in the hearts of parents. The latter will also be much more motivated to monitor possible remedial programs adapted to their child at home. In this way, progress is ensured before the assessment, and the possibility of satisfactory or excellent grades for children, parents, and teachers is greater. This state of mind experienced by all three actors involved in the educational process will cement the relationship of collaboration, mutual respect, and admiration between the child, parents, and teachers. Therefore, we can say that the family system, in such a partnership with the school environment, can be a winner. Everyone is happy because everyone feels that they are on the right track in this complicated educational process of learning and development.

Conclusions

The academic success of children in middle school is, in fact, a collaborative success. The functional teacher-parent-student triad is the basis for achieving performance in school, maintaining a healthy family environment that supports the child's growth and development, and achieving professional satisfaction and well-being for the teacher in school. All of these are strong premises for the psycho-educational growth and development of children in grades V-VIII, children with strong characters and a good education who will become the well-mannered and well-educated adults of tomorrow, making important contributions to the development of Romanian society.

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