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Growing through Challenges in the Middle School Years

Supporting connection, confidence, and coping – together

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Today's 3 Goals

By the end, you'll have language + tools for the "in-between" moments.

1) Normalize what's happening

Understand what middle school development can look like (emotionally, socially, behaviorally).

2) Typical vs. when to worry

Spot patterns that are short-lived vs. concerns that may need extra support.

3) Practical strategies

Practical strategies to support growth while building independence.

Core mindset:

"Your child isn't giving you a hard time — they are having a hard time."

Normalize What's Happening (Developmental Stages)

Middle schoolers are building skills — not mastering them yet.

What you might notice

Big emotions
Questionable judgment
Poor impulse control

These are common “in-progress” skills at this age.

Helpful reframe

“They aren’t giving you a hard time — they’re having a hard time.”

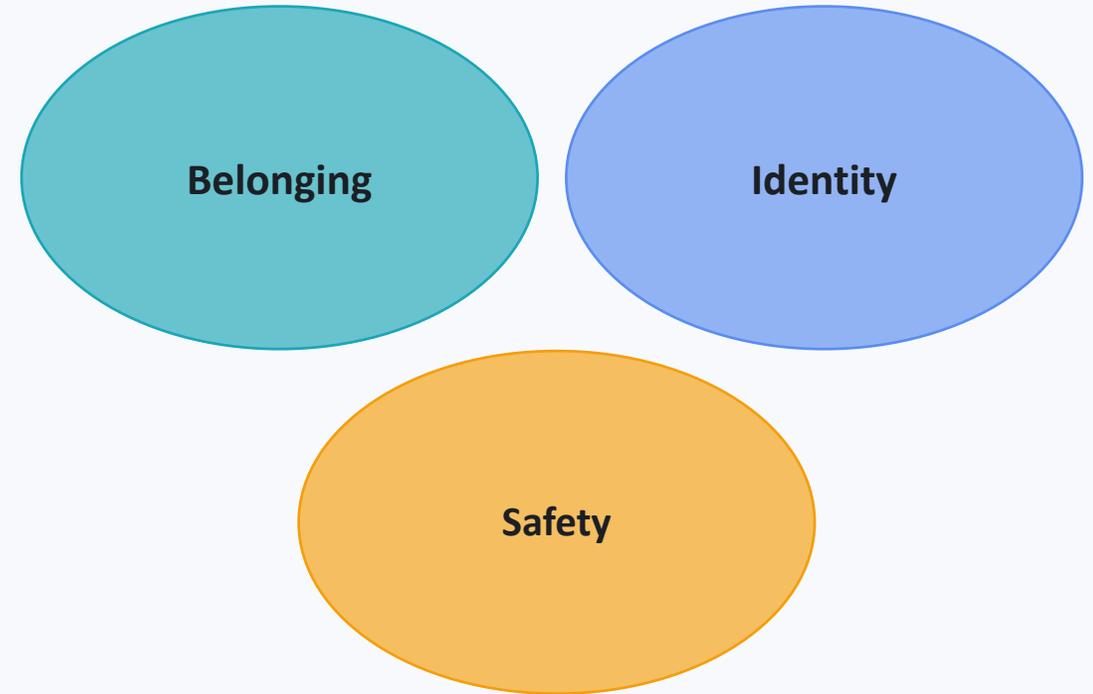
Translation:

You’re seeing a “practice phase.” Our job is to coach skills (and calm) — not to expect adult-level self-control 24/7.

Social World: Peers, Identity, and Rejection Sensitivity

Why it can feel intense:

- Peers matter more (approval, belonging, comparison)
- Increased sensitivity to rejection and exclusion
- Friendships can feel “all-or-nothing” (stable... then not)
- Identity is forming — safety in relationships is huge



Parent move: validate the feeling first, then coach the skill.

What You May See: Behaviors That Often Show Up

Common “in-progress” behaviors

- Testing limits / arguments
- Forgetful / procrastination
- Emotional shutdowns
- Explosive reactions

Often: skill gaps + stress + peer pressure



Helpful lens

Ask:

- 1) “What skill is missing?”
- 2) “What stressor is here?”
- 3) “What support helps them practice?”

Typical vs. When to Worry

Often typical (short-lived)

- Moodiness / irritability
- Pulling away from parents
- Changing friend groups
- Occasionally “I don’t want to go to school”
- Power struggles

When to look closer

Duration • Intensity • Frequency

- Sadness / irritability lasting weeks
- Withdrawing completely
- Long-term patterns affecting functioning
- Safety concerns (self-harm, threats, severe aggression)

It’s not overreacting to ask what’s going on — especially when your “parent radar” is up.

Conversations That Build Connection

Asking what's going on is not an overreach.

Try sentence stems

"I notice..."

"I see..."

"I wonder..."

Tip: aim for curiosity (not interrogation).

Connection before correction

Kids want to feel understood.

Choose your battles.

Balance support + independence.

Open discussion (10 minutes):

What conversation starters work best with your child?

Practical Strategies: “Middle School Superpowers”

“We can’t do it for them... but we can support them through the productive struggle.”

[Middle School Superpowers ~ Raising Resilient Tweens in Turbulent Times by Phyllis Fagell, LCPC \(2023\)](#)

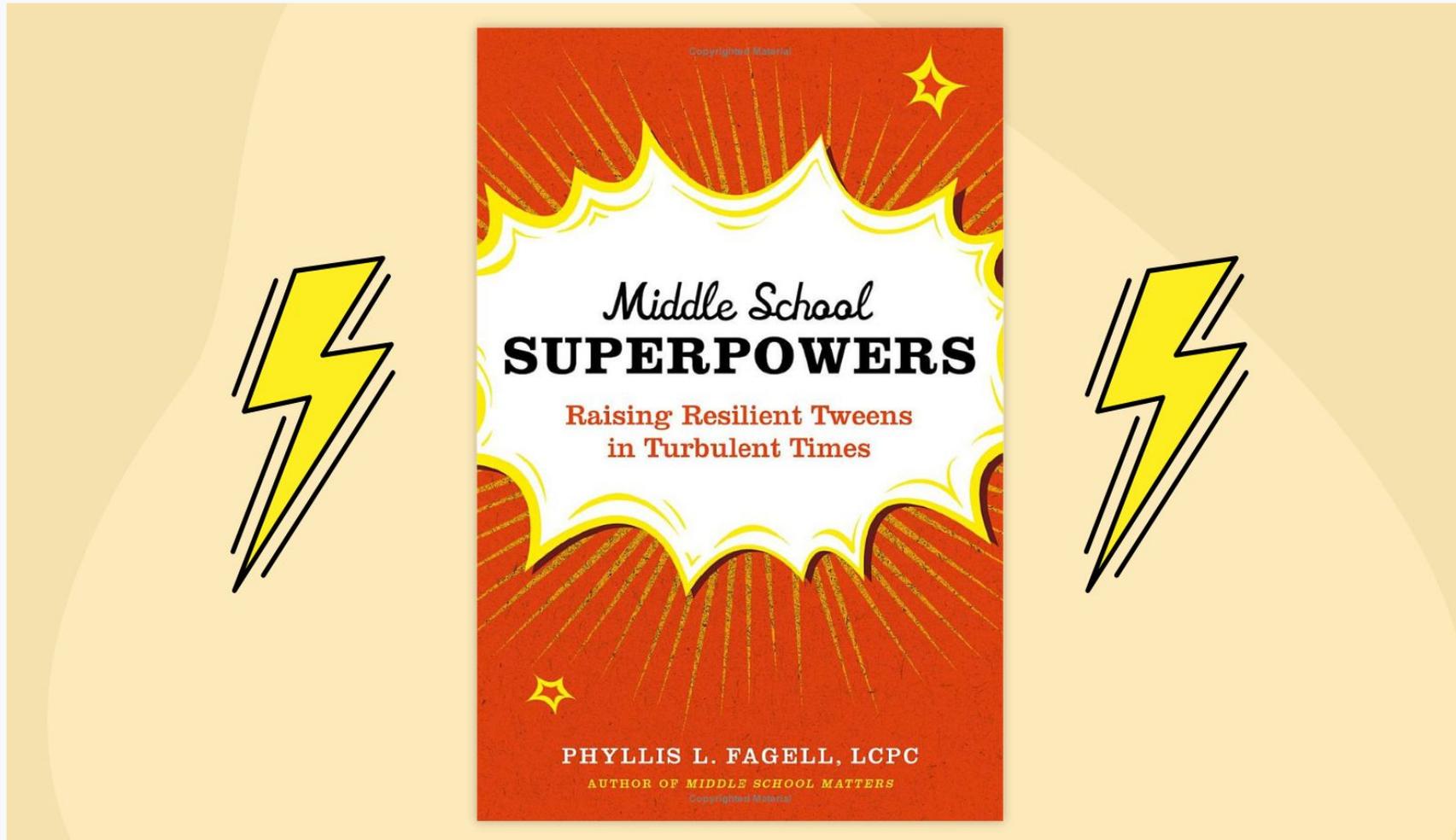
12 “superpowers” that build resilience and relevant throughout the middle school years:

- Super Flexibility
- Super Belonging
- Super Sight
- Super Vulnerability
- Super Bounce
- Super Agency

- Super Force Field
- Super Security
- Super Healing
- Super Balance
- Super Daring
- Super Optimism

Practical Strategies: “Middle School Superpowers”

Middle School Superpowers ~ Raising Resilient Tweens in Turbulent Times by Phyllis Fagell, LCPC (2023)



Four Superpowers to Practice (and Discuss)

Super Flexibility

- Reframe situations / change the narrative
- Normalize change with accurate info
- Make space for concerns (even small ones)

Super Belonging

- Check your own assumptions
- Assume positive intent (when possible)
- Help them interact comfortably with peers and acquire social skills
- Connect to caring adults at school

Super Healing

- Keep communication low pressure and frequent
- Name feelings → then problem-solve
- Model coping out loud
- Build a personal coping toolbox

Super Balance

- Aim for realistic progress, not perfection
- Support getting started (ambivalence is normal)
- Movement + play + downtime

Reflection: Where does this show up in your daily life? What makes it hard to apply?

Key Takeaways (and a Helpful Reminder)

What we want you to leave with:

- Middle school is messy — and temporary
- Big feelings don't mean a bad kid (or bad parenting)
- Connection is more powerful than control
- You are still the most important adult in your child's life

A reminder for parents:

Aim for: support + space to struggle.

When adults push “constant happiness,” kids can miss the chance to build coping skills.

[Child Therapists Say These Behaviors Can Harm Kids' Happiness | HuffPost Life](#)

Conversation:

- 1) What does the “productive struggle” mean to you?
- 2) What's one strategy you want to start or try this week?

Please provide your feedback here: 

