

Moms, you think babies are tough? Wait until middle school

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Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

Mothers are deeply invested in the well being of their children, so when children go through trying times so do their moms, according to a new study by Arizona State University researchers Suniya Luthar and Lucia Cicolla.

Many assume that the most taxing years for mothers are during their children's infancies, but the new research shows that far more challenging is the [middle school](#) period. Aside from puberty, this is a time when the [school environment](#) becomes more impersonal, academic grades are much more public, "being popular" becomes fervently sought after and efforts to separate from parents start in earnest. All of this adds up to a tumultuous time for children, and therefore, for those who must nurture and guide them through this trying period.

For Carolyn D., a medical professional in Chandler, Ariz., her teenage son seemed increasingly dismissive of what she had to say, as in a striking conversation on how Advil worked.

"I'm a doctor. I know how Advil works, but he was telling me I didn't know," she recalls. "It is hard when they look at you like you have this innate stupidity. It used to be that I was all knowing."

Concerns about kids' risky behaviors escalate sharply at early adolescence.

"From the perspective of mothers, there's a great deal of truth to the saying, "Little kids - little problems; big kids - big problems," says ASU Foundation Professor Suniya Luthar. "Taking care of infants and toddlers is physically exhausting. But as the kids approach puberty, the challenges of parenting are far more complex, and the stakes of 'things going wrong' are far greater," added Luthar.

Luthar and Cicolla's paper, "What it feels like to be a mother: Variations by children's developmental stages," is published in the January issue of *Developmental Psychology*.

Luthar and Cicolla studied more than 2,200 mostly well-educated mothers with children ranging from infants to adults and examined

multiple aspects of mothers' personal well-being, parenting and perceptions of their children.

When considering disturbances in mothers' own adjustment, the study showed "an inverted V shape in feelings of stress and depression, with mothers of middle school children (aged 12 to 14 years) consistently faring the most poorly and mothers of infants and adult children doing the best," Luthar said.

Why are the early teen years so tumultuous?

"Several factors come together in a perfect storm, Luthar said. "One, the kids are dealing with puberty and all that this implies - hormones, acne and changing bodies. Two, they are drawn toward experimenting with alcohol, drugs or sex."

"They are also coping with transition to a relatively impersonal school environment, with large buildings and different teachers for each class, as opposed to the relative safety of smaller elementary schools with the same teacher all year. Their academic performance is now evaluated in a much more public way than before, as are their extracurricular talents," she added. "Finally, as they strive to separate from their parents, the peer group takes on enormous significance; early adolescents are very invested in 'being popular,' desperately wanting to fit in and be admired by their peers. That is a lot to deal with simultaneously."

As the children struggle to negotiate all of these major challenges, so too must their mothers as their primary care givers.

For Carolyn D., sometimes the old soothing methods still work for her son, sometimes they don't, and she is both perplexed and worried about how best she can protect him.

"Sometimes a hug is helpful," she says. "But sometimes not at all. There are times when they don't even want to be seen with you in public. They want you to drop them off away from the drop off point."

"Moms are essentially the 'first responders' to the children's distress, and now they must figure out how best to offer comfort and reassurance, as the old ways - hugs, loving words and bedtime stories - no longer work," Luthar explained. "They also have to walk a very fine line in setting limits. On the one hand, moms want their children to be open in sharing what they do with their friends, and on the other hand, there is the real concern that such honest exchanges might seem like they are tacitly condoning [risky behaviors](#), if disclosed.

"Decisions about what to allow, where to draw the line, how to effectively draw the line - all of these bring confusion and even fearfulness," Luthar said. "And then, of course, there is the hurt, from the eye-rolling, distancing, and even blatant scornfulness, from the same child who was unequivocally adoring just a few years earlier. That rejection hurts - it can hurt deeply."

In addition, Luthar and Cicolla cite other studies showing moms of early adolescents are likely experiencing their own developmental challenges as they begin to recognize declines in physical abilities, cognitive functioning and increased awareness of mortality. It also is a period when (according to other studies) marital satisfaction is the lowest and strife the highest.

All of this adds up to stressed out moms of middle school children.

Luthar suggests two interventions that can be done to minimize mothers' stress. One is information dissemination to be done not just when the child enters middle school but in earlier years so they know what is in store for them. The second is providing ongoing support for the mothers,

once the children do start middle school and continuing through graduation of high school.

"It is not enough simply to educate the mothers about the teen years, they must be 'refueled' themselves as they shepherd their children through this often tumultuous time," Luthar said.

"We have learned that if mothers are to retain their equanimity as parents and as individuals, they need to receive nurturance and tending themselves," Luthar added. "This new study shows it is during the hectic middle and high school years - perhaps more than ever - that [mothers](#) must deliberately prioritize the regular receipt of 'authentic connections' in their everyday lives."

The juggling of every day activities has taken its toll on Carolyn D. and her son. In order to meet their schedules and let him still do competitive climbing, they agreed her son would take one online math class. But he didn't keep up with the work early on in the course and nearly failed.

"He was super panicked and super upset about it," she says. "I was really upset with myself because I thought that had I been a better mother I wouldn't have let him fall that far behind. If I had been more on top of things this wouldn't have happened. But when we sat down and discussed it, I said if you take the time and work really hard you are going to do ok. He did. He worked hard and got a B in the class. So what started out with me feeling like I failed, ended up being a very good lesson for him. But it all happened during very trying times."

Provided by Arizona State University

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