Moms’ Middle-School Blues
Mothers feel most stressed about parenting when their children are in middle school, new research shows

All mothers have their ups and downs, but their children’s middle-school years are when they feel most empty and unfulfilled, a large new study shows. WSJ columnist Sue Shellenbarger joins Tanya Rivero to discuss.

Mothers feel more anxious, dissatisfied and doubtful about their own parenting skills when their children are in middle school than at any other stage, new research shows.

The turbulence that hits sixth- through eighth-graders often begins with the onset of puberty, bringing physical changes and mood swings. Also, many students transfer from close-knit elementary schools to larger middle schools. Childhood friends may be separated, classes are often tracked by ability and teachers are more demanding.

Mothers often lose touch with other elementary-school parents who became friends. School officials often press them to back off and give students a longer leash. As a result, some parents may withdraw from others and bottle up the stress and sadness they feel if their children rebel at home or hit a rough patch at school.
The finding that moms of middle-schoolers have greater distress and lower well-being comes from the most ambitious and carefully targeted look yet at mothers’ well-being from childbirth until their children’s adulthood. The study of more than 2,200 mostly well-educated mothers was published in January. Those with infants and grown children are happiest, says the study, led by Suniya Luthar, a psychology professor at Arizona State University in Tempe.

Mothers were recruited for an online survey by word-of-mouth, fliers, media reports and lectures. Researchers asked them to respond to validated scales measuring anxiety, depression, stress, emptiness, loneliness, parental guilt, overload and perceptions of their children’s behavior. Researchers took pains to compare only mothers whose oldest and youngest children were in the same age group. This avoided any distortion that might result if there was also a happy baby or successful young adult in the household to mitigate the depressing impact of a rebellious teen.

Researchers expected to find that mothers of infants were almost as stressed as mothers of middle-schoolers, and were surprised by the result, Dr. Luthar says. “Infancy is of course trying, with the physical exhaustion and the nights up, but it’s also very rewarding to hold that baby. It’s magical and sweet,” she says. Fewer offsetting rewards come in middle school.
Mothers’ and fathers’ confidence in their ability to be good parents, including disciplining, influencing and communicating with their child, falls precipitously in middle school, says another study, a three-year look at 398 parents of children ages 11 to 15, published last year by researchers at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C.

Jeff and Jennifer Grosman of Washington, D.C., with their children Max, now 11, and Hannah, now 14. Dr. Grosman felt isolated at first after Hannah began pushing for more independence last year. PHOTO: LISA RAYMAN GOLDFARB
Researchers knew from previous studies that parents of teens have less confidence in their parenting ability than parents of younger children. To explore when and why those declines occurred, they recruited parents of 11- and 12-year-olds from two middle schools and had them complete interviews and written questionnaires at three one-year intervals. Among triggers for parents’ loss of confidence, the study says, were puberty-related physical changes in the children, a decline in the quality of parent-child communication and a parental belief in negative stereotypes about teenagers.

“Middle school is a gray zone—that difficult time when you don’t feel like you have the skills to handle the challenge” of parenting, says Patti Cancellier, education director for the Parent Encouragement Program, a Kensington, Md.-based parent-training nonprofit.

Jennifer Grosman felt isolated after her daughter Hannah, now 14, began pushing for more independence last year. In middle school, “parents aren’t hanging out and bonding at the kids’ birthday parties anymore, so there isn’t an informal opportunity for conversations about parenting,” says Dr. Grosman, a Washington, D.C., psychologist. It is easy to assume your child is the only one struggling, she says. “And when people say, ‘How’s your kid doing?’ you feel like you have to say, ‘Uh, fine.’ ”
She and her husband Jeff took a 10-week class on parenting teens at the Parent Encouragement Program. They learned that other parents were having similar struggles and that much of what their daughter was going through was normal.

Dr. Grosman and two other parents also started an informal discussion group for parents of sixth-grade classmates of her younger child, Max, who is 11, to give parents a chance to build trusting friendships early in middle school. About 10 to 15 participants have met monthly since last fall to discuss topics suggested by group members, Dr. Grosman says. The group has gone so well that she plans to start a similar one for parents in her daughter’s ninth-grade class.

While worry and guilt about a child’s behavior are factors in the middle-school blues, personal needs for close friends and acceptance and comfort from others are often a more powerful predictor of mothers’ distress, Dr. Luthar says.

Having close friends you see often is a potent antidote, Dr. Luthar says, but many parents lack time for friendship “because their kids are in 10,000 activities and they’re busy ferrying them across town, worrying about college admissions” and other stressors, she says.
Colin, Kimberly, Annie, Michael and Tim Hicks. Colin is 12, Annie is 13, and Tim is 15. Ms. Hicks fights the urge to withdraw from socializing when she feels stressed. PHOTO: STEVEN DYMOWSKI

Dr. Luthar is testing a workplace program for employed mothers that encourages them to build close friendships. Participants must find at least two people who will agree to be their “go-to committee,” meeting with them weekly to listen and provide mutual support, she says. “The premise is basically that the same love we give to our kids, we all need for ourselves. That’s what the women are encouraged to do for each other.”
Kimberly Hicks began feeling isolated, sad and ineffective as a parent last year after her daughter withdrew from the family emotionally during middle school, arguing and criticizing family members and spending more time in her room alone, says Ms. Hicks, of Burtonsville, Md. She enrolled in a parenting class and learned that stepping back and letting her daughter make more decisions for herself might ease her rebellion.

Ms. Hicks, who is trained as a counselor, battled the urge to bottle up the stress. When she told a friend that “deep down, I’m afraid I’m not doing everything I’m supposed to do as a parent,” Ms. Hicks says, she took comfort in the friend’s empathetic reassurance that she’d felt the same way with her own children.

Ms. Hicks also fights the urge to withdraw from socializing when she feels stressed. She attends a weekly women’s group at her church. She also gets together every week or two with a friend, another middle-school parent who has similar views on child-rearing. As they work for two or three hours together on household projects, such as cleaning the garage, “we’re talking the whole time,” she says.
Al Watts, a dad in South Elgin, Ill., has found his kids’ middle-school years harder than he expected. He doesn’t talk about the challenges with other dads as often as he suspects a mother would, he says, but he calls other dads or joins message boards to share problems. Left to right, Anna, 13; Ben, 9; Macy, 11; Rachel, 7; Shirley and Al Watts. PHOTO: KATHY ELKEY

Men share parenting problems, but they tend to be “much more direct and to the point,” says Al Watts, an author in South Elgin, Ill., who stays home to care for his four children, ages 7 to 13.
Mr. Watts says he worries about keeping communication open with his two oldest children—Anna, 13, and Macy, 11. “I thought middle school would be easier, and I was totally wrong,” he says. “The problems are much more complicated.”

When a boy asked Macy out on a date, Mr. Watts called his brother, who has a son in sixth grade, for advice. His brother’s response: “I’m glad I don’t have that problem.” Still, Mr. Watts says, talking it over helped him stay calm.

He enrolls in parenting classes offered by his school district. He also logs onto a Facebook group run by the National At-Home Dad Network, a fathers’ group, frequently, to read others’ posts and comments.

Mr. Watts has trouble finding time to see friends. When a close friend from Nebraska recently came through town, however, he made a point of meeting. “Dads need that connection too,” he says.