

# Significant Developments

**Jamie Tender explains why Middle School is essential college prep**

It may seem odd finding a correlation between 10- to 14-year-olds and college, but it really isn't that far-fetched.

Middle school students are going through the most significant development (physical, emotional, cognitive, and social) since they were two years old. A developmentally appropriate Middle School supports and nurtures students through this growth period and allows them to flourish as young adults. Many of the skills successful college students need are taught in Middle School and reinforced through Upper School at "higher" or age-appropriate levels.

The brain develops in significant ways during the middle school years, allowing students to think differently when presented with new material and concepts. As the frontal lobe develops, students are able to move from concrete thinking to abstract thought.

Our curriculum reflects this understanding by offering a greater emphasis on algebraic concepts and integrated lessons in English, art, and history. The ability to equate seemingly unrelated ideas is literally a new way of thinking for many students at this stage. Seventh-grade math teacher Judy Fitzpatrick points out, "They move from 'I know the answer in arithmetic,' to

understanding the process needed to solve a more complex equation. And that is the important part, not just the answer."

This cognitive development also requires students to develop the skills to plan ahead. Cell phones can have a negative impact on this skill set, since students can use technology to overcome a lack of planning. We see these skills coming into play with time management, multi-tasking through projects, and with homework completion. These skills will be honed for the next seven years and then utilized in the university setting.

Students' social development is significant because it is the nexus of their existence in middle school. This goes beyond peer to peer interactions; the teacher to student connection is as significant in the learning process. Saint George's students learn to use their teachers as a learning resource, but not with an "us against them" mentality. Students develop the ability to ask questions and "challenge" in a respectful way, to push the envelope of learning and engage in the process. Peer to peer relationships also are important, since students are learning to pick up the social cues from peers, to work in groups, to listen and learn from one another, to cope with adversity and social issues, and to make meaning of it all in the end.

Social and emotional development are often linked to one another. Students' emotional wellness is often tested during this growth period. They do not want to stand out but are often self-centered. They are comfortable with friends but less confident outside their peer group.

Young people develop coping mechanisms to become resilient, just as we all do. Between parents,



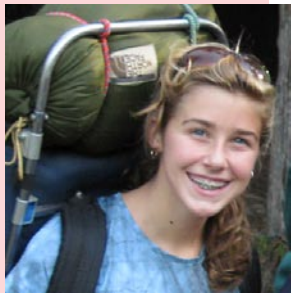
**Eighth graders negotiate a balance challenge and test their courage rappelling down from the top of the 40-foot Dragon Crag**



## Class Bonding on the Freshman Outback Trip

One of the major advantages we have at Saint George's is our ability to provide diverse learning experiences for our students, giving them many ways to discover, express and burnish new interests and talents. I know that some students eagerly anticipated the overnight trips at the start of school while others viewed getting out of their comfort zones with a bit of dread. From what I saw on the Freshman Outback and heard from the other class trips, everyone felt really good about what they accomplished. Our hope is that this willingness to rise to a challenge continues throughout the year.

– Russell Werkman,  
Head of Upper School



From top: Thumbs up on the hike to Upper Priest Lake, hanging out at camp, packing it in, and preparing to launch the canoes on a warm and sunny August day



friends and the Middle School faculty and staff, a “safety net” is in place to help students learn to overcome adversity. If students experience success as well as failure in small doses, they can learn to overcome and learn from their mistakes. This prepares them for real world experiences.

A great example is when students take risks such as joining an athletic team for the first time, participating in Math is Cool, or attempting a high ropes course. Students put themselves in a vulnerable position and expose themselves to possible failure. These experiences will often produce success and develop valuable skills, but only by providing adversity that must be overcome. This is when team mates or peer support systems kick in to help students find success.

It is similar to the Mindset theory by Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck. Kids that have been told for years that they are smart often are not willing to take risks, at least compared to students that have had to work at learning and develop

the skills to acquire new information.

Middle school students are emotional beings; they strive for independence but need structure and support. Our hope is that they come out of Middle School instilled with both a love of learning and the skills to harness the power of learning. One of my mentors described it as “playing the game of learning and not the game of school.”

Saint George's Middle School students go on to the Upper School with the skills they need to be very good learners. They have the ability to manage the added responsibility that goes hand in hand with their new-found independence.

– Jamie Tender, SGS Middle School Head

### On the Web

See more images from the Freshman Outback Trip and the MS 8th Grade Team Building exercises at [www.sgs.org/news\\_and\\_photos](http://www.sgs.org/news_and_photos)