October 5, 2011

Dear Parents,

Greetings from the Middle School! We all know that this is a time of tremendous change for children. To help students navigate these changes, teachers at the Out-of-Door Academy lead activities that help kids grow beyond the confines of academic training. I will open this letter by describing one such Middle School activity, which was a recent discussion about respect. We separated students by gender and grade level. Each group had two teachers to lead the conversations. As you may imagine, the boys’ discussions were quite different from the girls’, but all of them were interesting and revealing.

I’ll start with the girls. Girls in both the seventh and eighth grades focused on how they treat each other—gossip, cliques, and social dynamics. The girls know how they are supposed to behave, but they have hard time putting this knowledge into action. This is understandable, given that many girls at this age tend to think in extremes (i.e., someone is either a best friend or worst enemy) with very little room for middle ground. Although we did not plan it this way, both groups ended up discussing civility. Teachers provided guidance on how to be cordial with neither the obligation nor the necessity of being best friends. The girls were eager to talk and, as Ms. Dozier noted, they could have gone on all day had we let them. For many students, the discussion provided a venue to address issues and a place where their voices could be heard. Several girls thanked teachers afterwards, shared that the discussion was helpful, and asked whether we would have more discussions. We will.

As for the boys, I am pleased to share that I can dispel a myth about Middle School males. There is a misconception that these young men lose all ability to communicate beyond one-word sentences and the occasional grunt. Definitely not true! The boys in the eighth grade were talkative, engaged and attentive in their discussion of respect. Their conversation was about taking responsibility for one’s actions. Also, they discussed the effects of sharing information that is overheard, particularly rumors and snippets of information that could hurt feelings. The teachers guiding the discussion sought to help the boys navigate these situations and understand the consequences of their actions.

Finally, the discussion with the seventh grade boys approached respect from a different angle. They discussed respect for personal space. Middle School boys do not rely on language when they interact. Instead, they tend to bump into each other, jostle around, and chase one another. Unfortunately, not everyone embraces such behavior, so teachers focused the discussion on being aware of one’s environment and respectful of others nearby. My favorite part of the conversation was the part that dealt with the consequences of physical activity: body odor. The discussion included pointed instruction on the proper use of deodorant and how to respectfully navigate the delicate discussion one should have with a buddy when the latter is pungent. When I shared this story with the parent of one of our Middle School
boys, she exclaimed, “Thank goodness! I’ve been telling my son that for a year, but he won’t listen to me. Thank you!”

As I mentioned in a previous letter, the entire school has been talking about respect. One of my additions to the conversation was at morning announcements, where I described how showing respect is one way to impress people. What is impressive for a Middle School student? Consider the informal experiment that I conducted. Generally, when I pass students in the breezeway I say hello, smile, or greet them in some other manner. The goal of my experiment was to learn what would happen when I did not initiate the greeting. Instead of saying hello, I walked silently and observed students’ reactions. There were three responses. In the first, students suddenly became interested in their shoes. Upon spotting me, they immediately looked down at their feet and scurried past. In the second response, students faced straight forward and walked by as if they were wearing blinders and could not see me. The third response was the impressive one: students smiled and said hello. It may not seem like much, but this skill truly sets students (and many adults) apart.

One of the things I love about Middle School students is their sense of humor. When I shared my observations, some students ignored my advice while others seemed to take it to heart. A subset of the latter group now makes a point of greeting me at least a dozen times per day, usually with voices that are loud and proud, and with mischievous smiles on their faces. It’s funny – and I encourage it. A smile is a wonderful price to pay to get kids to practice their greetings. There will be a time when they have to make a terrific first impression. I hope that the practice we do at Out-of-Door will help.

Before I close this letter, I want to remind you of upcoming events. We will have a Middle School Coffee on Friday, October 21 after morning dropoff. Also, make sure you attend the Middle School College Night on October 26 so you can learn about our exceptional College Counseling program. Homecoming, the Family Picnic, the Wycliffe Exchange, and the Middle School Pumpkin Carving contest are this month, too. There are plenty of ways to get involved. I look forward to seeing you on campus.

Sincerely,

Bruce Latta
Head of Middle School