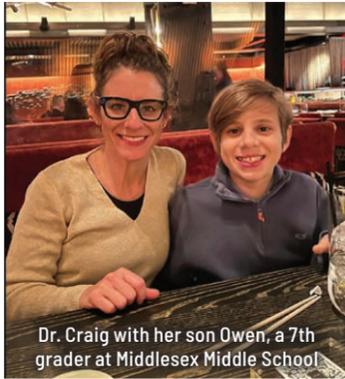


# We the Brain Changers

## Fostering Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Middle School: What You Can Do at Home

BY PAMELA DEY VOSSLER WITH DARIEN RESIDENT AMANDA CRAIG, PHD, LMFT



Dr. Craig with her son Owen, a 7th grader at Middlesex Middle School

You hear the comment—it's racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic or something equally as awful. Or perhaps you see it in a behavior, or overhear it while carpooling, something said off-the-cuff in the back seat among friends. Maybe it's written anonymously on a bathroom wall, posted on social media or hurled in a hallway or playing field, and you learn of it through the grapevine, in the local press or in a message sent home from school.

However it comes your way, it socks you mid-gut, especially if it involves your kid. You think: What is going on? That is not the child we're raising! It can shake us to our core.

As parents, what should we do? What *can* we do?

A lot, as it turns out, especially if our child is nine-to-twelve years old—in the developmentally critical tween years, according to Darien resident Amanda Craig, PhD, licensed marriage and family therapist (LMFT) and author of the tween parenting book *Who Are You and What Have You Done with My Kid* due out this fall from Hachette Book Group.

"The tween years are a time of *massive* brain growth," explained Dr. Craig. "It's similar to the neurological explosion that takes place in the first few years of a child's life," she said.

Interestingly, the part of the tween brain that expresses emotions develops first for tweens, flinging all these new thoughts and feelings at our child. Meanwhile, their prefrontal lobe—home to the reason and perspective used to process those emotions, has yet to make much of an appearance. So while the tween brain is *very* good at responding emotionally, it's not yet so good at measured response, weighing the impact of words and actions with empathy and emotional intelligence. And because tweens don't yet have the prefrontal lobe capacity—let alone life's experience—to communicate or even understand all the new thoughts and feelings hitting them, they are uncertain, awkward. It makes them ego-centric and hyper-focused on how they are measuring up in their peer groups—they will do and say things just to see how their friends react.

In addition, the neural pathways developing in our tween's mind that get the most air time are ultimately coded into their brain as they grow up. What is not used is tossed ...or at the very least cast into the far reaches of their mind.

"The brain is very efficient," said Dr. Craig. "It keeps what is used and clears away what is not. For parents that means there are *big* opportunities to shape behavior, teach and reach our kids

before the turbulent teen years descend upon us," she added.

"When our children are tweens, they're still listening to us. They look to us for advice and help translating the world and all that is just starting to come on line for them," explained Dr. Craig.

Because of where they are physiologically, tweens don't necessarily know the weight and hate behind that racist or bigoted comment or action. Certainly they don't yet have the brain development to craft a pre-meditated plan to hurt. Rather, they may be trying out something they heard on TikTok or YouTube to see how it lands with their peer group. Most times, they are not aware even when they are stereotyping or doing things that amount to microaggression ...things that can cascade in terrible directions.

"Tweens are not malicious," said Dr. Craig. "They're not thinking through things and getting deep into the steps to take to be mean to somebody. That's not really their jam. They're really more impulsive," she continued. "They're exploring the world from how they *feel*. There's not an awareness, but there's an emotion. And so they're in a peer group and they behave. They're checking out how what they do is received."

So we *can* teach them. We *must* teach them. But that starts with honest acknowledgement.

"It's so easy to see and hear kids say things that might be construed as a microaggression, or as a racial slur, things that hurt somebody's feelings or are downright discriminatory. As parents we can say, 'It's not a big deal. Kids will be kids.' Or we can say, 'Oh, I'm so embarrassed with that' and do nothing in hopes the moment passes," said Dr. Craig, acknowledging the privilege guilt that can also sometimes keep us from addressing their behavior.

"But when we do nothing, we do two things," she continued. "We send a message to our kid in a very covert way that their behavior is OK and we miss the moment to teach and educate."

So, rather than ignore the behavior or jump to our adult response to an ugly comment or action and shame our tween, we can start a conversation. According to Dr. Craig, we can explain. We can embrace the learning experience that it is, the opportunity to help tweens understand the power of diversity.

"If we shame our tween, we'll shut them down or they'll pull away and guard against us. But if we can slow down and say to ourselves, 'That's interesting my kid said that. Totally not appropriate and perhaps it warrants a punishment' but also take the chance to talk about things in a way that opens discussion, we can help them develop neural pathways that we want them to continue to use and build on and keep in the forefront of their mind," explained Dr. Craig.

"We can ask questions like, 'Tell me about what happened. Tell me what that was like. Have you imagined it this way? What might that be like? Can you imagine being on the receiving end

of being called that? Or being told that?'" offered Dr. Craig. "It's so important for parents to open up some space to teach our kids what they said, what they were thinking about, and how it has the potential to hurt somebody. In doing this, we're also modeling empathy. They don't quite have that yet," she added.

Furthermore, Dr. Craig continued, when we take time to talk, to listen, to explain, we give our tween a foundation so when they come to their peer group, they are prepared. If a tween comes from a family that never talks about race, diversity or differences, they will default to what they may be picking up on social media and outside the home, things that may not align with our value system at all.

"And when we teach them early on, their brain will start to organize around embracing differences," added Dr. Craig. "They will store this and it will help lead them as they grow older. They will know, innately, that differences aren't something to be teased or taunted, but are actually a normal part of life and society. They will know that we want to enjoy and appreciate our differences. They will see the benefit of having people of all color or socioeconomic status or religions, or gender identities, etc. at the table," she said.

"The tween years are the perfect time to start training the brain. Because of all the new neuropathway growth, we can be brain changers. We can help them understand the ramifications of what they say and do," said Dr. Craig. "We have a responsibility to teach our kids and to have conversations with them so that they learn diversity's a great thing," she concluded.

For more from Dr. Craig, visit [www.amandacraigphd.com](http://www.amandacraigphd.com) or follow her on Instagram @amandacraigphd.

**HEIGHTS PIZZA**

**COMPANY**  
DARIEN, CT

**\*\* NEW \*\* NOW SERVING**  
**"MIKE'S HOT HONEY"**

**For a special treat, try it on one of our**  
**delicious pizzas accompanied with**  
**Cup&Char Pepperoni or on some**  
**yummy Atomic Wings!**  
**You'll thank us later!!!**

**882 Post Road | Darien, CT 06820**  
**203-656-3200**



Psychotherapy,  
• Psychological,  
• Medication  
• Management

• Substance Abuse  
& Addiction

• Financial Management  
& Advising

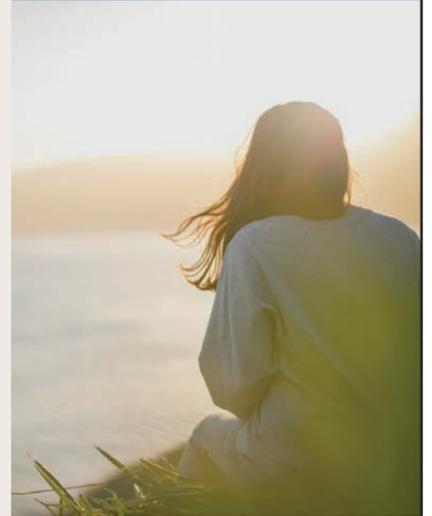
• Legal Services

• Lifestyle & Wardrobe

• Career Consultation  
& Life Coaching

• Educational Services  
& Tutoring

A collaborative community  
of professionals designed to  
treat the whole person.



(203) 636-0080  
[www.thelifesolutioncenter.net](http://www.thelifesolutioncenter.net)

**LEARYS**  
**LIQUOR**  
**CABINET**  
Since 1971

Since 1971 Leary's Liquor Cabinet offers the best wine, beer, and spirits at the lowest prices allowed by Connecticut state law. Our welcoming and knowledgeable staff will assist you in making suitable pairings of wine with food, beer choices, and spirits.

Proud supporters of the Darien community, we at Leary's believe in the true meaning of customer service. Stop by and browse our wide-ranging selection of wine, beer, and spirits today!



**Celebrating 50 Years!**



Winner of the best Liquor Store in Darien, New Canaan and Rowayton magazine for 2010, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016 and 2019

**Leary's Liquor Cabinet**  
186 Heights Road  
Darien, CT 06820  
203-655-0508

@Learysliquorcabinet

@Learysliquorcabinet