

Parent Involvement at the Middle School Level

Many parents who are actively involved in the education of their children at the elementary school level become less involved when their children reach middle school. However, parent involvement in a child's education during the middle school years (ages 10 to 14) is just as important in a child's success at school as it is in earlier grades. If the school doesn't have a formal participation plan for parents, it is important that parents take the initiative to continue their involvement and collaboration in their children's school.

What Is a Middle School?

Middle schools are schools that group students between the ages of 10 and 14. In some parts of the country, children from fifth to ninth grades are grouped together; in other parts, seventh- and eighth-graders are in one school. One of the most common middle school arrangements groups children from sixth to eighth grades.

What Are Middle Schoolers Like?

As children grow, they begin to experience physical, intellectual, and emotional changes. The way they learn, feel, see the world, and relate to other people becomes different from when they were younger. These changes, along with demands from present-day society and peer pressure, create conflicts and tension in the adolescent, which are reflected in their behavior in school and at home.

Young people at this age show a good number of contradictions and conflicts, which is normal. There is no "model" adolescent. All young persons are individuals with strong and weak points and with positive and negative qualities. There are some common characteristics that should be kept in mind in order to understand and help the middle schooler in daily activities at home and at school:

- Adolescents have high levels of physical and emotional energy, which may contrast with long periods of idleness, generally disapproved of by adults.
- They take risks, are curious, and love danger and adventure, yet their feelings can be hurt easily. This is the time when they feel immortal, but they worry a lot about what their friends think about them.
- They want to be independent from their families, and at the same time, they need to be pampered and protected.
- They withdraw and want a private life, and at the same time, they worry about being accepted by their peers.
- They demand privileges but avoid responsibilities. At the same time, they are developing an awareness of social problems and the welfare of others.

Adolescents from other cultures sometimes face an additional burden as they develop their identities and try to comply with the requirements of home and school. On one side, they have the values and customs of the home that the family wants to maintain, and on the other, they have to respond to the demands of their peers and teachers, who have a different set of rules.

Why Is It Important For Parents To Be Involved at the Middle School Level?

The results of recent research are very clear: When parents are actively involved in their children's education, they do better in school. *The academic level of the parents, their socioeconomic level, and their ethnic or racial origin are not determining factors for academic success.* It is essential for parents to have a positive attitude regarding education, and to demonstrate trust that their children can do well.

How Will Your Children and Your School Benefit From Your Involvement?

When parents become involved, both students and school benefit:

- Grades and test results are higher;
- Students' attitudes and behavior are more positive;
- Academic programs are more successful; and
- The schools, as a whole, are more effective.

The participation of all parents, including those with limited knowledge of English, is important to the academic achievement of their children. Such participation has many positive consequences for the family, the school, and especially for the young adolescent:

- The family has the chance to understand the school system better.
- The teachers can understand students who come from other cultures more easily.
- The students receive support from adults in order to confront the problems of adolescence-particularly where these problems are accentuated by the conflicting cultures of home, friends, and school.
- The school can become the natural extension of the home, aiding in the preservation of families' cultures and values.

What Can Parents Do To Support Education at Home?

There are many ways that parents can demonstrate to their adolescent children that they are interested in academic success and that they are available to offer support and protection when there are problems. Here are some suggestions:

- Talk with your child about what happens at school every day. Ask often if there are messages from the school.
- Spend some relaxed time with your children. Share a meal or a snack. Tell them often what you like about them.
- Listen to and share their worries. Support what you believe to be good about the school and offer your help to change any school practices that you believe could be harmful to your child.
- Avoid scoldings and arguments when your teenagers bring bad news home. Listen to their reasons and offer your help to improve the situation. It helps if your children know you believe they will be successful.
- Value their education by encouraging homework and reading. Help your children choose a good time and place to do their assignments and special projects. Provide the necessary materials and give them your unconditional support.

What Can Parents Do in the Middle School?

The way that parents become involved in the middle school can be somewhat different from what they were accustomed to in the elementary school. Generally, the building is larger, and it could be located farther from home. A middle school student may have several teachers, not just one as in the elementary school. The schedule is probably more complicated.

Don't be surprised if your teenagers feel embarrassed when you go to their school. It is not uncommon for them to resent their parents' presence at school. Here are some suggestions to increase your involvement:

- Get to know several teachers, not just one. Don't wait for a problem to talk to them.
- Keep in touch with the guidance counselors. They generally know all of the students in the school, and they can keep you informed regarding the progress and behavior of your child.
- Read all information on school policies and curriculum carefully. Normally, schools send this information home at the beginning of the school year.
- Review your child's school records each year. It is your right, and you should know what information is in the file.
- Keep informed about your child's grades and test results, especially in any subjects in which he or she has problems. Ask for help if it is needed.

- Request periodic meetings with the teachers. If you don't speak or understand English, ask for a translator or bring a bilingual friend or family member with you. Request information concerning programs that the school offers for students with limited English proficiency. Be sure your child is placed in the program that best meets his or her needs.
- Get to know other parents and form support groups to work on problems and issues of mutual interest.
- Answer notes and other correspondence the school sends. If you do not understand these messages due to language problems, ask the principal to send them to you in the language you understand.

(Most of this information has been taken from "The Middle School Years: A Parents' Handbook," published in 1991 by the National Committee for Citizens in Education.)