

# How to SUPPORT YOUR MIDDLE SCHOOLER'S NEED FOR AUTONOMY

By Leslie Czerwinski, Rowland Hall Social-Emotional Support Counselor

**A**s younger children start to enter middle school, it can be a chaotic time for caregivers. We all do our best to guide this pre-tween group, and somewhere between loving the close-knit relationship you have known for years and feeling like you're walking on eggshells, students enter middle school. I'd argue middle school is one of the most vulnerable, human experiences we get to have as we develop and move through life. Their brains are strengthening connections they have made and getting rid of those they are not using, their bodies are developing and changing, their friendships are evolving, they have more responsibility and stress than in previous years, and, depending on their family systems, their expectations are tending to ramp up. Talk about a whirlwind!

**Middle schoolers need autonomy, period.** The question to answer is how much and when. They come to middle school from a place where all of their choices are being made for them: they are told what to wear, who they play with, what they do with their free time, even how and when they fail or succeed. In elementary school, it's really normal for caregivers to make a lot of important choices for their children. This is how we teach children about expectations, family values, and cultural norms. We are literally mapping the brain with responses to the world and different situations as they are growing. We have all been in a situation where we give too many choices to a young child and their brain explodes with overwhelm. It's a delicate balance, and it's different at different times with different kids.

**As students enter middle school, caregivers need to dig deep and trust the foundation they have put in place for their students.** Their world is opening up, and the only way they will succeed after middle school is through a certain recipe of adult connection and support, low-risk opportunities to fail, and trusting themselves. Developmentally, elementary schoolers are still operating with mostly their caregivers' voices as the central decision maker; as students transition to middle school, they are trying to listen to themselves, differentiate their own voices from their families', and trust themselves. One way to help them trust themselves is to let them make choices for themselves and experience the consequences of those choices. When I am working with parents in my office at school this is generally where they cringe.

**Let's try to entertain this statement for a moment: When we take away a child's right to make choices and see those choices through, we are passively communicating, "I don't think you are capable of handling this," or, better yet, "You need me to help you handle this."** Now, I'm not talking about throwing anybody into the deep end of the pool without swimming lessons and a life preserver, but I can tell you that when we see this type of indirect communication over and over again, we see children who become easily dysregulated when challenged, children who would rather quit than try and fail, and children who over-rely on adult approval and direction. But when we share our reasoning for our choices with children when they are younger and start to offer age-appropriate choices as they develop, when we let them experience their own successes and failures, when we process through their choices with them and have empathy for their humanness, we see strength, resilience, and higher levels of empathy for others.



# READY TO BETTER COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR CHILD?

Here are a few tips to try out:

**1. Give away as much control as you can.** Think low-risk opportunities for failure. As caregivers, our number-one job is safety. When we think of safety in a physical sense—where our children might be harmed or at risk—these are mostly non-negotiables. Make these expectations clear, and then find opportunities where your child can have a lot of choice in other areas. Give lots of options for middle schoolers and practice flexible language.

Use words like *or* and *and*: “I know you already did an hour of homework, and I would like you to finish your math assignment.” Often we use the dreaded word *but*, which negates what was said before it, as well as invalidates everything that happened before. Try using *and*.

Also try using words like *before*, *after*, *during*, and *when*: “Would you like to do your homework now or after dinner?” The point is you don’t care when it gets done, as long as it gets done. Let students have a choice in how they schedule their days and then point out observations if those choices don’t seem to be working. “I noticed the last three nights you chose to do homework after dinner and you weren’t able to finish your reading because you were so tired. What do you think would help you complete the homework?”

**2. Help children process choices with curious statements.** Try starting sentences with:

“I wonder if...”

“I’m curious about...”

“Can you tell me more about...”

“Help me understand...”

“What were you feeling when...”

“I see how...”

**3. Understand where you end and your child begins.** I can’t stress this one enough. Caregivers need mindful practices too. Next time your child is making a big choice or desires to do something different than you would, notice what happens to your body. Where are you feeling it? Is it really about your child, or is it about your anxiety over the possibility of them failing, experiencing pain or difficult outcomes, etc.? As caregivers, we can gather so much information about ourselves through intentional interactions with our children. Use this information, then take a deep breath, support their choices, and be there for them whether they experience success or failure.



*Leslie Czerwinski studied psychology, childhood studies, and adventure education prior to earning her master’s degree and obtaining her Clinical Mental Health Counselor license. She has over 10 years of experience connecting with and supporting students of all ages. Leslie also holds a 1,000-hour certification in yoga therapy, and she integrates these principles into her therapeutic practice.*

