The Role of Parents During the Middle School Years: Strategies for Teachers to Support Middle School Family Engagement

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Abstract

Family engagement in middle school is essential to ensure optimal learning. Middle-level educators (typically Grades 5 or 6 through Grade 8 in the U.S.) play a pivotal role in helping to guide parents' understanding of their evolving roles in supporting their adolescents' academic success. Students particularly benefit from (a) parental support for learning that is developmentally appropriate, and (b) age-appropriate boundaries and positive relationships resulting in the perception that adults in their lives care. These strategies, supported by open lines of communication and effective partnerships between schools and parents, can support the academic success of middle school students and build collective trust between educators and parents. In this article, we provide research-based strategies for middle-level educators to effectively communicate with parents to bolster developmentally appropriate family engagement. These strategies are paired with examples demonstrating how the research translates into practice.

Key Words: middle school students, family engagement, parents, teachers, educators, partnerships, reciprocal communication, metacognitive strategies, adolescence

Introduction

The transition to middle school coincides with the onset of adolescence, a time of rapid physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development (Eccles et al., 1993). Early adolescents are developing a greater desire for increased autonomy; they want to establish their independence and want to know that the adults in their lives believe that they can and will be successful (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles et al., 1991; Flores de Apodaca, 2015; Goldstein et al., 2005). Although parents (a term we use to include both biological and nonbiological custodial caregivers) generally want to support their young adolescents, the middle school context is more complex compared to elementary school, and adolescents' desire for autonomy may translate into a reluctance to share information about their lives outside the home with their parents (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Laird & Marrero, 2011). Consequently, parents are left wondering how to help when they see their young adolescent facing struggles that are inherent in adjusting to a new school context. The convergence of adolescent development along with the transition into a new school environment can lead parents to struggle with finding effective ways of providing academic support; these frustrations ultimately may lead to parents developing feelings of mistrust toward the school (Forsyth et al., 2011). However, educators can play a key role in helping parents learn how to support students during this important new phase of their lives (Duchesne et al., 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Hill & Tyson, 2009).

In the present article, we focus on strategies that middle grades educators can communicate to parents to facilitate positive transitions for middle school students and to build collective trust between parents and teachers. First, in the section "Building Trust with Families Through Communication," we provide context for the importance of communication in fostering family engagement. Next, we briefly review the empirical literature that identifies the developmental needs of early adolescents in the section "What Do Adolescents Need to Thrive at School?" Then, in the section "Two Key Messages," we present two key ideas that are at the crux of supportive family engagement during early adolescence: (a) parental support for learning that is developmentally appropriate (i.e., "It's essential to support your young adolescent's learning; you just have to do it differently"), and (b) age-appropriate boundaries and positive relationships resulting in the perception that adults care (i.e., "It's essential to provide structure and support for your young adolescent's growing independence"). These strategies, supported by open lines of communication and effective partnerships between schools and parents, can support the academic success of middle school students (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Hill & Tyson,

2009). Finally, in the section "Two Messages, One Goal" we discuss how effective implementation of developmentally appropriate family engagement strategies leads to improved student outcomes in a wide range of school contexts by promoting equitable opportunities for families to invest in their young adolescents' success.

Building Trust With Families Through Communication

Collective trust—that is, shared trust between parents, teachers, and administrators—is a key ingredient in creating the conditions for student success (Forsyth et al., 2011). When parents and teachers trust each other, they are more likely to have a sense of collective efficacy (i.e., that they can work collaboratively at supporting the adolescent's academic and social-emotional growth), and thus they are more likely to raise their expectations (Forsyth et al., 2011). These three ingredients—trust, efficacy, and expectations—have been shown to create a school climate that significantly improves student achievement (Hoy et al., 2006).

An essential antecedent to collective trust is the development of a common understanding of role expectations (Forsyth et al., 2011). In the middle school years, the role of parents in supporting academic growth and how it differs from effect parental engagement in elementary school may be unclear. Once a common understanding of the most effective roles for parents is shared by parents and teachers, collective trust can be built through regular and consistent communications that are collaborative, professional, proactive, and solution-focused, and that leave both parents and teachers feeling valued for their expertise and committed to a common cause (Forsyth et al., 2011; Gutman & Midgley, 2000).

Reciprocal communication, in which teachers and parents both initiate and receive messages, builds collective trust by establishing and nurturing common understandings. Frequent teacher–parent communication increases student engagement through stronger relationships, expanded parental involvement, and increased student motivation (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). Moreover, the nature of the interactions between teachers and parents may be more important for establishing trust than the frequency of the interactions (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Parents may be more willing to be involved than teachers expect, prefer high-leverage and actionable improvement messages, and appreciate invitations to communicate with teachers (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

In this article, we focus on two key messages that teachers and other school personnel can share with parents, along with strategies to enact those key messages. The two key messages are (1) "It's essential to support your young

adolescent's learning; you just have to do it differently," and (2) "It's essential to provide structure and support for your young adolescent's growing independence." These two messages broadly focus on how parents can (a) support learning at home, and (b) simultaneously provide the types of parenting supports and structures that are developmentally appropriate for young adolescents. Middle-level educators who embrace the unique developmental needs of young adolescents have the opportunity to work together with parents to provide the best possible support for every student, at home and at school (National Middle School Association, 2010). Moreover, we propose that once partnerships are established, collective trust must be nurtured through reciprocal, two-way communication regarding best practices for supporting academic success during middle school (Duchesne et al., 2009; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Hill & Tyson, 2009). As a result, middle school students may experience increased intrinsic motivation, higher academic performance, and greater academic self-efficacy (Bronstein et al., 2005; Forsyth et al., 2011; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hoy et al., 2006).

What Do Adolescents Need to Thrive at School?

The strategies that parents used to support their child's learning during elementary school may not work as well during middle school (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Some of this difference is attributable to a mismatch between the developmental needs of young adolescents and both home and school environments (Eccles et al., 1996). When the needs of adolescents are not supported, middle school students often experience declines in achievement and motivation, as well as increases in behavioral infractions and social problems (e.g., Anderman & Mueller, 2010; Wang et al., 2011). For example, if a young adolescent is struggling with time management and forgets to study for a test, she may receive a low grade on that test. Her parents may react by imposing stricter monitoring and checking her assignments each day. This may even be recommended by the school. However, these parents and teachers may not consider young adolescents' increased need for autonomy; thus the introduction of a strict homework monitoring schedule, while well-intentioned, may be perceived as controlling and a demonstration of nonconfidence in the young adolescent's abilities (e.g., Grolnick et al., 2015).

From a developmental perspective, adolescents flourish when they experience developmentally appropriate environments both at home and at school (Eccles et al., 1993). Broadly, adolescents benefit in particular when they (a) can make meaningful and informed decisions, (b) experience positive, caring relationships with adults (i.e., teachers and parents), (c) focus on self-improve-

ment and growth (rather than on social comparisons), (d) are encouraged to explore and utilize their emerging cognitive abilities, and (e) develop a growth ("I can do") mindset (Dweck & Yeager, 2019; Eccles et al., 1996). Parents may benefit from understanding these emerging developmental needs and utilizing effective strategies to support them. Middle school educators have the unique opportunity to provide parents with such strategies through communications with parents. When school personnel establish effective communication with parents, they have the mechanisms in place to partner with parents in their use of these strategies (e.g., Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018).

Two Key Messages to Share with Parents

Let's consider a common scenario experienced by young adolescents and their parents at the middle school transition. The following anecdote is a hypothetical one based on the applied experience of one of our authors, a former middle school teacher and administrator in an urban, public middle school in the Midwest.

> Mia lives with her father and grandmother. When Mia was in second grade, she had only occasional homework assignments. Her teacher might send home a weekly spelling list, which Mia would practice with her grandma during bath time. Now, as a sixth-grader, things have changed. Most of Mia's assignments are on Google classroom. Her grandma is working second shift in the hospital, so Mia's dad is juggling helping Mia with homework and shuttling her between sports, choir, and the library. She usually has several different assignments from each of her classes, and it is hard for her and her dad to keep track of all the deadlines and requirements. Always a "good student" in elementary school, Mia's grades have started to decline a bit this year. In the past, if Mia would get overwhelmed or behind in her schoolwork, her dad and grandma would monitor her schedule more closely. But when they try that now, it seems to backfire. Mia is not cooperating, "forgetting" her planner, and procrastinating on her homework, and her grades continue to decline. School is different, Mia is a young adolescent, and family life is busier.

Mia and her family's experience represents the reality of many families. Although the transition may occur at different grade levels, the experiences of students and parents relative to the transition are largely consistent, given that adolescent development spans multiple years (Anderman, 2012). Schools play a critical role during this transition, and school personnel can provide parents

with strategies they can utilize at home to support their young adolescent's adjustment. When parents become familiar with developmentally appropriate strategies and have a variety of such strategies readily available, they are better positioned to support their children during this transition. In the next section, we focus in particular on two critical key messages for parents, as well as strategies that align with those messages that schools can communicate to parents of young adolescents.

Key Message #1: "It's essential to support your young adolescent's learning; you just have to do it differently."

The first critical key message to convey to parents is that it is just as important to support their young adolescents' learning now as it was in elementary school, but they may need to adopt different approaches (Eccles et al., 1993; Xu, 2002). There are a few key parental engagement strategies that are particularly effective as students transition to middle school (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Toren, 2013). These include (a) connecting academic content to the larger context of a young adolescent's life, (b) approaching homework and studying with positivity, and (c) guiding young adolescents as they grow into effective learners.

Connect Learning to Life

First, the ways that parents communicate their valuing of education and its importance for the adolescent's future make a powerful impression (Hill & Tyson, 2009). As the academic content of school becomes more abstract and less obviously connected to the real world, parents can support their young adolescent's academic process by pointing out connections between what they are learning and the future. Conversations about the value of education can be woven into everyday family discussions about what is happening at school. Opportunities to talk about the importance of school arise whenever parents and young adolescents come together (e.g., car rides, mealtimes, etc.). When parents help young adolescents connect what is being learned in school to future plans and possible careers, young adolescents come to understand how school fits into the bigger picture of their future success (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Middle-level educators can send home regular communications (e.g., in weekly newsletters or via text, voice, or email messages) that include an "Ask me about…" section, describing a few topics currently being studied in classes (Hill & Tyson, 2009). These can be prompts or conversation-starters that parents can use to open the door to what the young adolescent is learning during the school day. This provides parents with a starting point for conversations about the value of the content. These conversations can be further facilitated when schools share with parents how more abstract topics may relate to future careers. For example, many careers—from carpenters to chefs—require the use

of some form of algebra in daily calculations; many parents may be unaware of this connection, but a simple communication from the school might provide parents with an entrée into a conversation about the importance of learning math. A teacher might include in a newsletter the following: "Ask your child about what s/he is learning about ratios this week. How would a chef use ratios when planning a wedding reception dinner?" When parents know what is being studied and *why*, this information can serve as the basis for academic conversations at home.

In this current era of rapidly advancing technology, teachers have many free and accessible tools to facilitate two-way communication with families (Thompson et al., 2015). Free messaging applications allow teachers to send messages via each family's preferred method through a simple process (Gauvreau et al., 2019). Many such applications allow for file attachments and responses by message or "liking." They protect phone number confidentiality between teachers and parents, and they can provide set hours during which parents and teachers are available to receive messages. Most also support some degree of translation of messages to include parents who speak languages other than English.

> For Mia, her dad uses their weekly drive to her choir practice and their stop for take-out to check in about what she is learning. Mia's math teacher sends a weekly e-newsletter via a free messaging app describing their current learning targets and real-world connections; Mia's dad receives these on his phone and uses this information as a springboard for their conversations. This week, Mia's teacher shared that the class is learning about how a data set can be used to determine central tendency (mean and median) and variability. Mia's dad knows she wants to be a veterinarian, so he talks to her about how she might use the math she learned in school to compare a dog's weight to the median weight of the breed to make dietary recommendations. Mia noticeably perks up during their conversation, brainstorming other ways she might use central tendency and variability in her future job.

Positive Affect During Homework

Second, parents need to know that positivity during homework time is a powerful way to keep young adolescents feeling calm, confident, and able to achieve goals. Positive affect refers to a mood or outlook of positivity and includes parental actions such as keeping interactions fun and loving and demonstrating warmth and support. Pomerantz et al. (2005) studied parental affect in homework involvement and found that positive affect strengthened students' motivation and emotional functioning. Commonly, homework time

can lead to frustration for both young adolescents and their parents (e.g., Pomerantz et al., 2005). A key reason for this frustration is that when young adolescents are uncertain how to do homework, they may start to feel helpless and are more likely to give up, leading to frustration for adults as well. Parental negative affect during homework time may also have additional deleterious effects on students, further contributing to lower student motivation and confidence (Pomerantz et al., 2005). Nevertheless, a bit of frustration is part of human nature, and the occasional lapse into negativity will not be harmful if the overall tone of homework time is kept positive (Pomerantz et al., 2005). Adolescents may want families involved in homework when they need assistance (Xu, 2002). Students report enjoying homework more and feeling happier when they completing homework with short parent check-ins than they do when working alone (Shumow et al., 2008).

Through two-way communication with parents, middle-level educators can ensure that homework assignments are enjoyable, of reasonable length, and within the independent skill levels of the students. Parents have an easier time staying positive when they do not have to provide extensive help (Pomerantz et al., 2005). Therefore, young adolescents must feel confident in their ability to complete homework assignments. Middle-level educators should also encourage two-way communication with parents about homework to provide assistance and invite feedback, thereby ensuring that homework continues to be a positive experience for young adolescents and their parents (Walker et al., 2004). Parents benefit from being able to communicate with middle school teachers when young adolescents feel frustrated when completing their homework. Completing homework promptly is a challenge for many young adolescents, and even more so for students with disabilities or those who struggle academically, thus compounding feelings of frustration and inadequacy that they may harbor (Cooper & Nye, 1994; Stockall, 2017). Parent communication with middle school teachers when young adolescents feel frustrated with their homework provides educators with valuable feedback for their instruction and contributes to parents' trust in teachers. When educators encourage two-way communication about the homework experience, it may increase the confidence of parents to support their young adolescents at home (Pomerantz et al., 2006).

> Mia has homework almost every night, and evenings are a busy time. Mia's grandmother works most evenings at the hospital, and Mia's dad has dinner to make and his own work projects to tackle. After a few weeks of Mia procrastinating and then feeling stressed about getting everything done, Mia's dad and several of her teachers started communicating regularly via email, and Mia and her dad found a system that

works for them. As soon as Mia gets home, she has a snack and practices her singing; sometimes, on busy homework nights in the past, she would forget to practice. Now, she gets that done first, so she does not feel stressed later. Then, Mia settles in at the kitchen table while her dad starts dinner. Mia's math teacher makes sure that students have time to start on their homework at school, and she includes written directions and example problems on every assignment. If Mia starts getting frustrated, her dad has her take a break and then reminds her to look at the written directions and example. At Mia's parent–teacher conference, Mia's math teacher asks for feedback about how homework is going, whether it is too much, and how Mia handles moments of frustration. She gives Mia and her dad new ideas about how they can tackle assignments when Mia feels frustrated.

How to Be an Effective Learner

Parents also support their young adolescents in transitioning to middle school by helping them to become effective learners. Specifically, parents can help their children develop metacognitive skills. Students who have metacognitive skills purposely take the time to think about their own thinking (Flavell, 1979; Kuhn & Dean, 2004; Ohtani, & Hisasaka, 2018). Some examples of metacognitive strategies include setting goals, planning how to use time for homework and studying, and staying organized (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Toren, 2013). Middle-level educators should intentionally teach and reinforce study and organizational strategies (Dembo & Eaton, 2000). Middle school poses new challenges for young adolescents—they travel to multiple classes each day and must keep track of their belongings and expectations in each class; they also encounter more complex learning activities, including tests and long-term assignments (e.g., projects and essays). Each teacher also has multiple classes throughout the day and is less likely to know the needs of each learner as deeply as elementary teachers. Thus, young adolescents need to know how to stay organized, how to study effectively, how to break longer assignments into manageable parts, how to manage their time at school and at home, and how to self-advocate (Dembo & Eaton, 2000; Samuels et al., 2016)

Middle-level educators can communicate to parents the strategies they can use at home to provide students with guidance on how to organize and plan their studies. This includes providing clear and regular communication about tests, projects, and essays, including rubrics for grading and clarity about deadlines. Middle-level educators should share with parents the study and organizational tips emphasized at school so that parents can reinforce the application of those strategies at home (Hill & Tyson, 2009). When a school

utilizes teaching teams, team members should collaborate to develop consistent systems of organization, grading, and communication across the grade level so that young adolescents and their parents know what to expect and to ensure that parents with multiple children are not overwhelmed by the volume of communication. Furthermore, advances in communication methods (apps, email, social media, translation tools) make it possible for middle-level educators to send regular announcements and reminders to parents about upcoming deadlines and also facilitate parents' ability to ask clarifying questions.

> Mia's math teacher has announced that her class will have their first test in three days. Mia did not have much experience with studying for tests in elementary school; when she did have occasional tests, there was no expectation that she would prepare beyond the regular practice problems in class. Mia's middle school math teacher had the class write down the test date in their planners, and she also gives the students a list of topics to study. Together, as part of a class activity, the students brainstormed possible ways they might study at home, and each student picked several methods to try. Tonight, Mia's dad checks in with her about studying after receiving a reminder message from her math teacher. Mia shows him that she has made flashcards to remember the concepts of mean, median, mode, and standard deviation. However, she keeps confusing mean and median, and she's worried she doesn't understand them. Mia's dad has not taken math in years, but luckily, at the beginning of the year, Mia's teacher sent home a note about several YouTube channels that have short review videos on 6th grade math topics. Mia and her dad find a video that explains the mean and median. Mia's dad knows that she has three nights to study, so he asks her to decide how much time she wants to study each night and what study activities she wants to try (thus supporting her growing need for autonomy by encouraging her to help make decisions). Together, they make a plan for how Mia will study, and Mia feels confident that she can follow the plan and will be successful on her test at the end of the week if she puts in the effort.

Key Message #2: "It's essential to provide structure and support for your young adolescent's growing independence."

The second critical message for parents is that it is essential to balance young adolescents' need for autonomy with appropriate guidance and supervision. This can seem counterintuitive. How do parents promote autonomy and independence, while also providing guidance and supervision? There are a few key strategies that educators can communicate to parents that are particularly effective as students transition to middle school. These include being aware of

young adolescents' activities without intruding on their sense of autonomy, providing healthy boundaries, and collaborating in the creation of structures to support healthy decision-making.

Be Aware Without Being Intrusive

Early adolescence marks a stage in which the desire for autonomy converges with both an orientation towards peers, as well as difficulty cognitively connecting present actions to long-term outcomes (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993; Goldstein et al., 2005). As young adolescents begin to value their peers' opinions and priorities over the opinions and priorities of parents, teachers, and other important adults, they simultaneously are more likely to act impulsively in an effort to fit in or impress others. At the same time, young adolescents need and want to explore their own identities and to experience autonomy; they crave independence and often begin to have less supervision over their free time (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993; Goldstein et al., 2005). However, because they are not always able to assess the long-term consequences of their decisions and actions, young adolescents still benefit from their parents monitoring their behavior, especially during less structured times of the day and when using social media (Goldstein et al., 2005).

Adolescents are ready for more autonomy, so parental monitoring must be paired with a relationship of trust. Young adolescents who trust their parents are more likely to be honest about their activities (Laird & Marrero, 2011). An essential part of earning this trust is the parents' ability to modulate negative reactions by demonstrating support and love, even when a young adolescent makes a mistake (Laird & Marrero, 2011). Young adolescents will make mistakes, and an open and trusting relationship with their parents allows for open dialogue about these experiences.

Middle-level educators can help parents understand that it is vital to monitor young adolescents' activities without being overbearing or intrusive (Goldstein et al., 2005; O'Sullivan et al., 2014). Strategies that parents can implement can be as simple as feeling empowered enough to ask about the various topics that may be on a young adolescent's mind. Also, in the era of smart tablets and cell phones, many parents may struggle to keep up with the latest apps and social media to which young adolescents have access (Yardi & Bruckman, 2011). Middle-level educators can provide information about current trends in young adolescents' use of social media so that parents can have informed conversations at home about their young adolescents' online activities.

In the October family newsletter, Mia's school counselor provided parents with a list of various social media platforms being used by students along with suggested "conversation starters" that family members can

use with their teens to have informal, nonthreatening conversations about social media. Mia's grandmother is surprised to see Google Docs on the list. Mia's dad and grandma do not allow her to have social media accounts, but Mia has access to Google Docs as part of her school account. Over dinner, Mia's dad checks in with her about whether she sees friends at school using Google Docs to chat during class. Reluctantly, Mia admits that it is difficult to concentrate on her homework while her friends are chatting on a Google Doc, so Mia and her dad brainstorm how she can politely exit a conversation once it starts. They also check in on what to do if the conversation starts getting inappropriate or mean. Mia's father lets Mia offer her own ideas for how she can do this. Since Mia does not feel like she is in trouble, she is open to hearing her dad's advice, and she agrees to try some of his tips. The next day in English class, when her friend shares a Google Doc with her for chatting, Mia knows how to focus on her work without losing face with her friend.

Provide Healthy Boundaries and Promote Responsible Decision-Making

Early adolescents need boundaries, just as they did when they were younger, but they are also developing a sense of autonomy. Thus, young adolescents need and want to take an active role in developing and negotiating those boundaries. When young adolescents understand why rules are important, have a voice in creating rules, and know how consequences logically relate to those rules, they are more likely to accept and respect boundaries (Goldstein et al., 2005; Grolnick et al., 2015). Parents can support young adolescents' developing sense of autonomy by including them in discussions about creating structure, by providing reasonable choices, and by expressing empathy and allowing for discussion. This combination of parent-initiated structure, balanced with support for young adolescents' autonomy, benefits students because they are guided through responsible decision-making in a way that allows them to retain a sense of perceived competence and a degree of independence (Grolnick et al., 2000).

Middle-level educators should communicate to parents that family members should frame the discussion about structure for young adolescents by assuming positive intentions: young adolescents want to do right, and they feel confident that they can when they know their parameters (Grolnick et al., 2000). Educators can advise parents to connect the need for structure to how it helps young adolescents achieve their desired longer-term goals and provide examples for parents regarding how to create healthy boundaries. Middle-level educators can also help parents understand how developing boundaries in collaboration with young adolescents scaffolds the process of responsible decision-making (Grolnick et al., 2015). For many parents, finding the right

balance between providing boundaries while still inviting input in the process poses a challenge. Parents may be used to imposing rules in an authoritarian way, leaving little room for young adolescents to feel autonomous and leading to clashes between them and their parents (Goldstein et al., 2005). Educators can share with parents how young adolescent development necessitates an adjustment in how boundaries are developed and maintained. Educators can also model this process through the collaborative creation of rules and consequences in the school setting and can share this with parents.

> For Mia's twelfth birthday, her grandmother gave her a smartphone. At the September open house, Mia's school counselor gave a presentation to parents about young adolescent development, and she included tips about setting rules together as a family and explained why this collaborative process helps young adolescents practice responsible decision-making. This was a good reminder for Mia's family about why and how they can work with Mia to develop healthy boundaries for cell phone use, so they decide to talk about it over dinner on Saturday. During dinner, they discuss with Mia problems she has noticed her friends have with their phones. Mia mentions several problems, including the distraction of apps during classes and exhaustion from late-night texting. Mia is worried, though, that her family will set so many rules that she won't be able to enjoy her new phone. Before Mia can get too upset, Mia's grandmother asks her what ideas she has for healthy limits with her cell phone. Surprised to be asked for her opinion, Mia suggests having her phone off and in her locker at school, putting her phone away during dinnertime, and turning it off at a certain time in the evening. Mia's dad suggests that they charge the phone downstairs at night and Mia concedes. Mia's grandmother wonders what might be a natural consequence if the cell phone starts intruding on school or family life, and Mia suggests that if she cannot monitor her own time on the phone, they could set up time limits in the phone itself. Once the family discusses and agrees on each of the rules, they all feel confident that they have a plan in place for Mia to be successful with this new responsibility.

Two Messages, One Goal

Middle school students often experience declines in achievement and motivation and increases in behavior and social problems when instructional approaches and parenting strategies do not meet their emerging developmental needs (Anderman & Mueller, 2010; Wang et al., 2011). To increase the likelihood that instructional approaches and parenting strategies do meet the needs

of students, middle school educators can create meaningful, reciprocal partnerships with parents, communicating the developmental needs of middle-grade students and providing parents with concrete strategies to support student success (Kyzar & Jimerson, 2018). Creating a partnership with parents provides middle-level educators the opportunity to influence a smoother and more successful transition from elementary to middle school for students. We propose educators share two overarching, critical key messages: (a) young adolescents benefit from parental support for learning that is developmentally appropriate, and (b) young adolescents develop a healthy sense of autonomy when they have age-appropriate boundaries and perceive that the adults in their lives care. Communicating these messages and practical strategies with parents clarifies role expectations for effective parent engagement, which improves collective trust between parents and teachers.

When educators value the contributions that parents make to their middle school child's success at home, more parents have equitable opportunities to engage. Home-based family engagement doesn't solely rely on attendance at events at the school; school-based engagement is difficult for families with complex work or childcare schedules or lack of access to transportation. Our messages operate from the assumption that all families want to be involved, but their involvement may be demonstrated differently across racial, cultural, and socioeconomic groups (Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Jeynes, 2016, 2017). The two messages offered in this article promote an asset lens—a shift from what parents *aren't* doing to what they *can* do.

Our two messages promote one goal: successful academic and social/emotional growth for middle school students. We advocate tailoring communication from schools to families during the middle school years. Communications from school to home should aim to equip parents with strategies that are the best fit for the early adolescent developmental stage and should provide specific invitations for parents to provide feedback and share their perspectives. This is a stage of life when young people are developing a sense of their autonomy but still want parents, teachers, and other adults to support them with positive engagement and structures for learning (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles et al., 1991, 1993, 1996; Xu, 2012). Parent engagement that is tailored to the early adolescent developmental stage helps adolescents to increase their intrinsic motivation and affirm their autonomy, which may, in turn, result in better academic performance and greater self-efficacy (e.g., Bronstein et al., 2005; Hill & Tyson, 2009).

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