

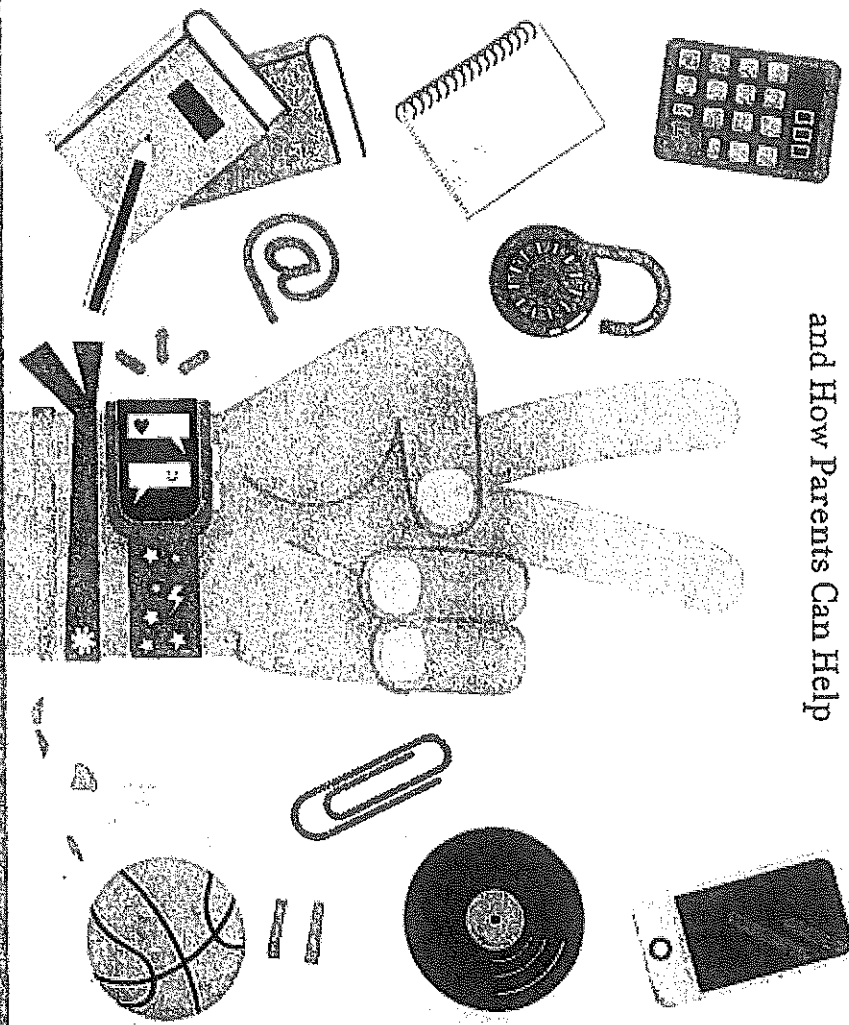


Middle School

MATTERS



The **10** Key Skills Kids Need to
Thrive in Middle School and Beyond—
and How Parents Can Help



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CHAPTER 1

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT MIDDLE SCHOOL?

"I've always loved middle school because kids are intellectually growing so much and discovering what they're passionate about, but still young and not too obsessed with whether they're cool. You can still capture that little kid part of them, but they're ready to go intellectually. It's that combination that's magical."

—SALLY SELBY, FORMER PRINCIPAL OF
SIDWELL FRIENDS MIDDLE SCHOOL

WHAT SETS MIDDLE SCHOOLERS APART? MIDDLE SCHOOL IS when life begins to get more complicated for kids, but it's not just the setting that makes it different. The psychologist G. Stanley Hall first identified early adolescence as a unique phase in 1904. By the 1950s, pioneering Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget had built on Hall's research and was working on developmental stage theory. We now know much more about these unique years of early adolescence—and why we should give them special attention.

These years are a time of incredible growth; the only other time in a child's life when they changed this rapidly was between birth and age two. Your middle schooler is changing physically, intellectually, morally, socially, and emotionally. Their prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that handles executive functions and making decisions, is still developing. Adolescent developmental pediatrician Ken Ginsburg explains, "Brain development is

occurring at a heightened pace; your ability to experience and interpret emotions is very, very high; you're beginning to imagine yourself as an independent being; and you're trying to figure out how you fit in." Ginsburg, the codirector of the Center for Parent and Teen Communication at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the author of *Raising Kids to Thrive*, wants parents to understand that adolescents' fundamental questions are "Who am I?" "Am I normal?" and "Do I fit in?"

Kids are starting to think abstractly, engage in moral reasoning, and look for meaning. They're tuned into fairness and equity, and they're starting to solidify the beliefs and values they'll hold for life. Social-emotional maturity is still a work in progress, and sorting out relational drama is a time-consuming task. Many are in the throes of puberty and becoming moodier, more self-conscious, and less self-assured. The great paradox of middle school is that kids can simultaneously feel judged and ignored. As they toggle between wanting to form their own identity and fit in with peers, they may withdraw or rebel.

Michael Gordon, a middle school principal for forty years, shared with me that both the fun and the challenge of middle school is that on different days, the same kid may present as thirteen going on thirty or thirteen going on three. "It often seems that two distinct versions reside simultaneously within the body of each student," he told me. "One is a wide-eyed, open, and happy child who will follow you anywhere with excitement and is amazed by almost anything well-presented. The other is more emotional and cerebral, capable of doing many things and synthesizing involved concepts."

When you consider what's happening to their brains and bodies, it's no wonder that the shift from elementary to middle school can be bumpy. By 1966, educators started advancing the need for a separate middle school model that could respond to the distinct characteristics of ten- to fifteen-year-old children. Still, there's reason to believe the traditional middle school/junior high model isn't ideal. In a study published in the *American Educational Research Journal*, investigators looked at 90,000 sixth through eighth graders in New York City and found that the social and academic benefits of being "top dog" are strongest in sixth grade. Kids seem to learn

and achieve more in schools with longer grade spans, whether the school serves grades K-8 or 6-12. In another study published in the *Journal of Early Adolescence*, researchers tracked 6,000 students from kindergarten through eighth grade. They concluded that starting a new school in sixth or seventh grade negatively impacts kids' motivation and feelings about their academic ability.

There are many different iterations of middle school. High Rock School in Needham, Massachusetts, for example, has a separate school that's just for sixth graders. The city's public middle school serves the town's seventh and eighth graders, which mirrors my own junior high experience. By the time I felt like I'd adjusted, it was time to leave. Other schools, such as Sidwell Friends Middle School in Washington, DC, run from fifth through eighth grade. That model allows the fifth and sixth grades to function as an upper elementary program within the middle school. I met with the school's principal, Sally Selby, shortly before her retirement. "The sixth graders benefit from the interdisciplinary nature of instruction, the homeroom model, and the real connection to one adult," she told me, adding that the oldest students benefit, too. "There's a refuge in having eighth grade in middle school that allows them to keep baking. They don't have to take on the weight of the responsibility of high school—the seriousness of, 'Oh my god, grades count.'"

Some educators are innovating to help students make a smoother transition to middle school. Robert Dodd, a principal in Maryland, collaborated with Johns Hopkins University faculty to assess whether sixth graders do better with less departmentalization. Dodd implemented the program, called Project SUCCESS, in two middle schools in his district and found that students have higher levels of achievement and social engagement when they spend half of each school day with one teacher and an intact peer group. It's an approach that more closely resembles the kids' elementary school experience. "The data is ridiculous," he told me. "These kids are more likely to feel that their teachers value and care about them and their peers want to help them."

I've been a counselor in both a huge, public 6-8 school and a small, independent K-8 school with a separate middle school program. In my

experience, one school model might soften the journey more than another, but the developmental phase seems to define the experience more than the setting. Whether or not a student is "top dog," children in early adolescence require sensitive educators who can address their unique needs.

It can be a tough transition. Suddenly, kids are expected to act a lot older than they were just a few months earlier. On top of juggling increased academic demands, they're navigating a more complex social world. The expectations are higher academically, socially, and even athletically. Students' performance and motivation often slide during this transition, and as the American Psychological Association notes, this can lead to self-doubt. They're also discovering their academic identity. This is when you might hear a child start saying, "I'm not a math person," or, "I'm terrible at art." We need to preserve their creativity and confidence, because middle school is around the time when both take a nosedive. (This is especially true for girls. A Ypulse study found that between their tween and teen years, girls' confidence that other people like them falls from 71 percent to 38 percent—a 46 percent drop.)

Middle school can leave the most self-assured parents full of self-doubt, too. Your child may test your last nerve or pull away, but don't be fooled. They all crave acceptance. If you're frustrated, baffled, or in need of an empathy boost, remember what it felt like to be twelve. Try to appreciate how exhausting it is for your child to manage supercharged emotions every single day.

The Ten Key Skills Kids Need to Thrive in Middle School and Beyond

No matter where your child is developmentally right now, my goal is to ensure they emerge from this phase with the following ten key skills, which range from the social and emotional to the logistical.

1. Make good friend choices. In middle school, shifting friendships are a given. The ability to make good choices in friends comes on the heels of making some questionable ones. Kids will figure out

quickly which friends instill a sense of belonging and which make them feel uncomfortable. Some will still insist on hanging out with the ones who make them feel terrible, and it can take a long time for them to realize they're sacrificing themselves. I'll cover everything from gossip to bullying, providing specific strategies to help kids manage social turmoil.

2. Negotiate conflict. Kids this age must cope with increasingly complex social interactions. They need to learn how to resolve conflict, whether they choose to go several rounds in the ring with a friend or walk away from a toxic relationship. They also must learn how to work with peers. Not many students get through middle school without feeling like they had to carry the load on at least one group project. Teamwork provides a window into kids' grit, flexibility, self-awareness, and resiliency. They might be hampered by clumsy social interactions or an inability to collaborate. I'll outline a range of ways to bolster their ability to work well with others.
3. Manage a student-teacher mismatch. Kids can learn from a teacher they don't like. It's a chance to practice working with someone they find difficult. This is a life skill they'll need in the workplace, and it requires understanding themselves. I'll offer strategies to help kids manage these types of situations so they won't feel powerless.
4. Create homework and organization systems. Ideally, children, not teachers or parents, take ownership of homework and grades. Kids may say they don't care, but they don't have to be invested in a particular outcome to change their behavior. After all, people who hate exercise can still choose to lift weights. They need to be able to create and tweak their organization systems and learn to monitor and take responsibility for their own work. If you care about this more than they do, why should they worry? They need to learn to carry the burden and experience the connection between preparation and performance. Conversely, if they're perfectionists, they need to know they can survive and manage the disappointment of a low grade. I'll give tips on raising independent, curious, motivated, and resilient learners.

5. Consider others' perspectives. If we want kids to accept their uniqueness and embrace differences in others, they must build their self-awareness. They also need to develop the ability to step into someone else's shoes. I'll describe how parents can build kids' empathy, foster their positive self-concept, and help them cope with setbacks by transcending the self.
6. Self-advocate. This is hard for adults, let alone kids, but it's imperative in a world full of people who'll tell them "no." By middle school, kids should be mastering how to ask teachers for help or clarification. To get them to a point where they can do that, we need to encourage them to take risks and manage fear. I'll describe how parents can help them progress from meek to direct so they don't fall through the cracks.
7. Self-regulate emotions. Children often need assistance labeling strong emotions before they can regulate them. It's not easy for middle schoolers to make connections between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They may be stuck in all-or-nothing thinking or be consistently self-critical. Unlike adults, they lack the benefit of life experience or perspective. I'll share how parents can help kids manage their stress, whether they feel bad about themselves, concerned about a specific situation, anxious about events in the news, or worried about their own future.
8. Cultivate passions and recognize limitations. When children are fired up about something, it's important to let them run with it. Even if their chosen interest doesn't seem exciting to parents, they're identifying their strengths and figuring out what drives them. They're also discovering where they struggle. This is useful information. No one needs to be good at everything, and school isn't one-size-fits-all. By honoring who they are and giving them appropriate outlets for their talents, parents can position their kids to feel competent and make a difference.
9. Make responsible, healthy, and ethical choices. Kids need to know how to respect and take care of their bodies and make safe, healthy decisions. It's equally important that they understand how to avoid

putting others at risk. I'll offer strategies to keep the lines of communication open as you tackle issues such as sexting or self-harm.

10. Create and innovate. Our changing world needs imaginative creators and divergent thinkers. When children think outside the box, it builds their confidence. As your kids do their homework, read required texts, and take standardized tests, they may not understand that these benchmarks are not the only ways to measure success. To be prepared for the innovation era, they'll need to be able to make connections across courses and to build, write, invent, and experiment. When parents foster an inventor's mentality, they heighten their kids' resourcefulness. For many adults, this requires a mind shift, so I'll offer specific tips.

If we want kids to master these ten crucial skills, we need to start with the basics. If you use the strategies outlined in this book, you'll set your child up to thrive in high school and beyond. I'll use a key at the beginning of each chapter to illustrate how different strategies help kids acquire these competencies. The book is divided into four domains: values and integrity, social skills, learning, and empowerment and resilience. Let's start from the inside, with values and integrity. To morally and ethically negotiate challenges, kids need a solid sense of self and empathy for others. Chapters on smart decision-making, honesty, kindness, and embracing differences are all about building kids' character.

The second section covers social skills. Chapters on shifting friendships, bullying, gossip, sex, and love will help you teach your kids to identify healthy relationships and cope with social turmoil.

The third section focuses on learning. To help kids take responsibility for their own learning, parents need to foster intrinsic motivation and set reasonable expectations. In chapters on grades, homework, and learning challenges, I'll talk about how to capitalize on kids' strengths and interests and address their weaknesses.

The final section is on empowerment and resilience. Chapters on staying connected to your sons and daughters and nudging them out of their comfort zone will help you teach them to self-advocate, connect with others, and communicate effectively. This section also offers techniques to

help kids manage setbacks, prepare for a changing world, and think flexibly and outside the box. Of all the skills on my Top Ten list, this one might be the most critical to their future career.

Parents' primary job is to love and honor their children, and this is especially important in middle school. The wider the gap between who kids really are and who they think you need them to be, the more they'll struggle. If they learn to embrace what makes them unique at an age when they most want to fit in, they'll be more accepting of others. Even as they establish boundaries, they need you now more than ever. You're the role model and safety net as they try on new identities and attitudes. I hope that you'll experiment with your kids, testing different approaches to academic, social, and emotional issues while the risks are small and the rewards are big.