

On Parenting

Top 10 skills middle school students need to thrive, and how parents can help

By Phyllis L. Fagell February 29

In elementary school, I was too shy to address my teachers by name. I would hover nearby, hoping they would realize I had a question. I also was the new girl, and the existing cliques seemed impenetrable. To make matters worse, I was a late reader and had difficulty articulating half the alphabet. Family members would euphemistically say I was just “slow out of the gate.” I had my work cut out for me.

By middle school, I was ready to throw myself into the mix. It wasn't always pretty. I got tossed out of classes for giggling uncontrollably. I navigated earning my first “D” and getting demoted in math. I had a knack for choosing overly dramatic and bossy friends, and I accidentally dyed my hair brassy orange. I agreed to go to a school dance with a boy, only to panic when I realized this involved actually going to a dance with a boy. I got busted for passing notes in class and for finishing overdue homework in the girls' bathroom.

On the plus side, I figured out how to connect with teachers, and I learned I could solve math problems when I made an effort. I discovered that books kindled my imagination and provided a mental escape. Sports played a useful role too, allowing me to burn off excess energy and improve my focus. I shifted social groups more than a few times. Overall, it was the typical junior high experience, one I relive frequently as a middle school counselor and as the parent of kids in seventh and eighth grade. Long before social emotional learning became a buzzword in education circles, I was stumbling along, acquiring self-awareness and problem-solving skills.

There is no manual to develop “soft” skills like perseverance and resilience. Just as I did, most kids learn through trial and error. As parents, our quest to protect our children can be at odds with their personal growth. It can feel counter-intuitive, but we mainly need to take a step back. I have come to believe that certain social emotional skills are particularly useful as kids navigate middle school and beyond. Here are my top 10 skills, and ways parents can help without getting in the way.

Top 10 Social Emotional Skills For Middle School Students

- 1. Make good friend choices.** This typically comes on the heels of making some questionable choices. Kids figure out quickly which friends instill a sense of belonging and which ones make them feel uncomfortable. It can be helpful to ask your children these questions: Do you have fun and laugh with this person? Can you be yourself? Is there trust and empathy? Common interests are a bonus.

2. Work in teams and negotiate conflict. I don't think many students get through middle school without feeling like they had to carry the load on at least one group project. Maybe they didn't delegate and divide the work effectively at the onset. Perhaps they chose to take ownership to avoid a poor grade. Help them understand what happened and consider what they might have done differently.

3. Manage a student-teacher mismatch. Unless there is abuse or discrimination, don't bail them out by asking for a teacher change. Tell them they still can learn from a teacher they don't like. Let them know it's a chance to practice working with someone they find difficult. Remind them that if they can manage the situation, they won't feel powerless or helpless the next time. Focus on concrete barriers to success in the class, not the interpersonal conflict.

Is it miscommunication? Study skills?

4. Create organization and homework systems. Make sure they are the architects of this process. Encourage them to come up with solution-oriented plans and tweak them as needed. Do they need to use their planner? Create a checklist? Their motivation will come from ownership. If they say they don't care, remind them that they don't have to be invested in a particular outcome in order to change their behavior. People who hate exercise can still choose to lift weights.

5. Monitor and take responsibility for grades. If you care more than they do about their grades, why should they worry? Let them monitor their own grades, and if they don't do well, don't step in to advocate for assignment extensions or grade changes. Let them carry the burden and experience the connection between preparation, organization and grades. Conversely, if they are perfectionists, they will learn they can survive and manage the disappointment of a low grade.

6. Learn to self-advocate. By middle school, they should be learning how to ask teachers for help or clarification. This may be in person or through email. When students bond with teachers, they connect more intimately with the material too. Unless there is no other option, try not to reach out on their behalf.

7. Self-regulate emotions. Children often need assistance labeling strong emotions before they can regulate them. Help your kids identify any physical symptoms that accompany their stressors. This may help them know when to take a breath or hit the "pause" button before reacting. In real time, point out when they handle an emotional situation well. Discuss the strategy they implemented—maybe they took a break or listened to music. Also, help them make connections between their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Are they stuck in all-or-nothing thinking? Are they consistently self-critical?

8. Cultivate passions and recognize limitations. When your children are fired up about something, run with it and encourage exploration. Seize the opportunity to help them go deep. Get books, go to museums and be supportive even if the subject does not excite you. In the process, you will help them figure out what drives them. On

the other hand, it is okay if they struggle in a specific area. That too is useful information. No one needs to be good at everything.

9. Make responsible, safe and ethical choices. Teach them to respect their bodies, and to make safe and healthy decisions. It is equally important to talk about how to avoid putting others at risk. Have open conversations and discuss plans for different scenarios they may encounter. Try not to be overly reactive if they ask shocking or distressing questions. Keep the lines of communication open.

10. Create and innovate. Our changing world needs imaginative creators and divergent thinkers. It also can build confidence to think independently and outside the box. As your kids do their homework, read required texts and take standardized tests, remind them that these benchmarks are not the only ways to measure success. Encourage them to make connections across material from different classes, and to build, write, invent and experiment.

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