



**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY**

CENTER ON EDUCATION AND  
TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT

# Partnering with Families for the Middle School Transition

Research-based Strategies for Middle-Level Educators

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**MIDDLE  
GROUND**

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The transition to middle school, whether that happens at 5th, 6th, or 7th grade, poses unique challenges and joys for families supporting their early adolescent's education. When early adolescents have several teachers, it is harder for families and teachers to develop relationships with each other.<sup>5, 15</sup> Early adolescents also desire more independence while, at the same time, they are still developing their own sense of confidence.<sup>1, 8, 9, 11, 19, 20</sup> If these challenges are not negotiated in ways that support their developmental needs at this critical stage, early adolescents may experience a drop in motivation, an increase in acting-out behaviors, a decrease in confidence, and diminishing academic performance.<sup>3, 13, 15</sup> Early adolescents are at risk of failing to reach their potential because of the changes in their development and school context, and they need special support to transition well to middle school.<sup>15</sup> Research demonstrates that home-based family engagement that is aimed at supporting early adolescents' growing autonomy and confidence, while also focused on building early adolescents' academic skills, is most beneficial at the middle school transition; this type of engagement differs from the school-based family-engagement strategies that are more effective at the elementary school level.<sup>3, 5, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 20, 21, 22</sup>

This document was created for administrators, counselors, and teachers, 4th through 7th grade, looking to improve their strategies for partnering with families in order to facilitate and support early adolescents' transition to middle school. The following strategies drawn from the research literature offer opportunities for educators to build stronger partnerships with families to support early adolescents' transition to middle school. Included after the strategies is a reflection tool for evaluation of current practices and brainstorming of opportunities for growth.



# Strategy #1

## Promote awareness of the changing developmental needs of early adolescents.

Early adolescents have a unique set of strengths and needs. From the ages of ten to thirteen, early adolescents develop a greater sense of autonomy. Autonomy can be defined as an increasing desire to be free from adult control. Although early adolescents seek greater independence, they also need to understand how their actions are connected to being more or less successful.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, they need to believe they have the skills necessary for success and that they have control over their own actions (i.e., a sense of autonomy). When early adolescents do not feel that adults at home or at school support their autonomy, they may search for more independence in the peer context.<sup>12</sup> The transition to middle school may also be a time of stress for early adolescents, especially about academic expectations and relationships with teachers and peers.<sup>4, 5</sup> Finally, early adolescents often start believing that their ability level is something that stays the same (also known as a fixed mindset), rather than something that grows with effort (in other words, a growth mindset). This fixed mindset can lead to decreased motivation.<sup>1, 6</sup> When early adolescents' developmental needs are met, they experience increased intrinsic motivation, higher academic performance, greater self-efficacy, increased self-regulation, less acting out, and increases in positive self-esteem.<sup>3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13</sup>

### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS & COUNSELORS CAN USE:**

- Develop a classroom and school culture that provides opportunities for early adolescents to practice autonomy by participating in decision-making and self-regulation.
- Explain to families how specific practices at home, like allowing early adolescents to participate in family decision-making and to have input in rule-making, encourage healthy opportunities to practice autonomy.
- Host family-support meetings, webinars, or other online or in-person forums. Share ideas in accessible ways and in ordinary language on topics related to early adolescent development such as motivation, conflict management, and developmentally appropriate structure and routines.
- Remember that families are early adolescents' first and most enduring teachers. Reach out to families for support to know the unique developmental needs of each student.



## Strategy #2

### Provide families with information about how to navigate the middle school context.

Many early adolescents worry about the transition to middle school, especially about academic expectations and changing relationships with teachers and peers.<sup>4, 5</sup> There is one type of family involvement that has been shown to be particularly effective in helping to ease these worries and to support academic success, while still allowing early adolescents to exercise their need for autonomy. This type of involvement is called *academic socialization*, and it includes “communicating parental expectations for education and its value or utility, linking schoolwork to current events, fostering educational and occupational aspirations, discussing learning strategies with children, and making preparations and plans for the future.”<sup>15</sup> (p. 742) Parents can help students to successfully navigate this transition by developing a shared understanding about the value of academic achievement, by communicating their expectations about academic performance, and by ensuring that their children are utilizing appropriate study skills.<sup>22</sup> An example of academic socialization would be a family helping an early adolescent break a longer project into manageable chunks to complete each night.

Academic socialization is particularly effective during early adolescence because it does not depend on families and teachers having deep relationships with one another (which can be difficult when students have several different teachers and when teachers have many different students each day). Instead, families only need a basic knowledge of the middle school context to be able to practice academic socialization techniques at home. When families provide support and assistance at home, early adolescents can maintain their autonomy by taking ownership of their actions in the school context. Schools can help families by identifying the tools that help an early adolescent be more successful in middle school: organizational skills for assignments and materials, planning skills for homework completion, study skills, self-regulation skills, how to advocate appropriately for needs, and how to draw connections between topics learned in school and future goals. This type of parental involvement works for families with busy schedules because it can be accomplished in short conversations at any time of the day. It is not dependent on a family’s academic knowledge or ability to speak English. Instead, it builds upon the strong family-child relationship already in place.





## **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS & COUNSELORS CAN USE:**

- Develop a consistent system for academic organization and share that system with early adolescents and their families. For example, show early adolescents how to use a simple homework folder system with one pocket for assigned work and one pocket for completed work.
- Make it clear how homework will be assigned, how often it will be due, and how it will be communicated.
- Introduce study skills that early adolescents can use at home and share these with families.
- Tell families how you can be reached for questions and assistance both during class and outside of class.
- Teach early adolescents how to manage their frustrations and stress about school, and share these strategies with families. Ask early adolescents and their families if they have other strategies that work.
- Communicate learning topics with families and explicitly link what is being learned in the classroom with future careers so that families can continue these conversations at home.



## Strategy #3

### Emphasize a growth mindset in the classroom, and provide families with ideas for how to encourage a growth mindset at home.

Early adolescents are at risk for “a disturbing downturn in motivation.”<sup>1</sup> (p. 288) This comes right at a time when achievement becomes particularly important, because academic work in middle school sets the stage for high school, college, and career. One factor that can affect early adolescents’ motivation is whether they focus their energies on mastering the content that is being taught (a “mastery goal”), or on demonstrating their ability (or hiding their lack of ability) to learn the content (a “performance goal”). When early adolescents hold mastery goals, they adopt an approach to learning referred to as a “growth mindset.” Early adolescents who hold a growth mindset believe that with enough effort, they have the potential to learn just about anything. They are more likely to engage in complex thinking, to stretch themselves academically, and to try out new strategies.<sup>1, 6</sup> Unfortunately, as grades, GPA, and testing become more important in middle school, early adolescents get the message that performance goals are more important than mastery goals; this focus on how they measure up compared to others can lead to decreased motivation and achievement. Teachers and families must work together to encourage a growth mindset and a focus on mastery goals. At home, families can encourage mastery and a growth mindset by “encouraging children to solve problems on their own, and emphasizing the importance of understanding and effort.”<sup>20</sup> (p. 200) Homework time is an opportunity for families to encourage a growth mindset, which can help early adolescents who doubt their own abilities to build stronger self-confidence.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS & COUNSELORS CAN USE:**

- Teach early adolescents to treat mistakes as opportunities to grow. Even if something is a challenge now, with practice and effort, success is possible.
- Avoid comparing early adolescents to their peers’ or siblings’ performance. Instead, help early adolescents to compare their own initial performance to their own performance after practice and effort.
- Share tips with families for encouraging a growth mindset during homework time.
- Collaborate with families to encourage children to solve problems on their own and to use different strategies when they get stuck.
- Adopt mastery-based grading practices. Allow early adolescents to revise and resubmit work until they hit a high bar.
- Explain mastery-based grading practices to families so that they understand the purpose and can provide encouragement for their early adolescents’ persistent efforts.



## Strategy #4

### Provide actionable and specific improvement messages to help families support their early adolescent.

Communication between families and schools is an essential element of family engagement; however, the role of communication must align with the unique developmental needs of early adolescents at the middle school transition. On one hand, families' confidence in their early adolescents' abilities predicts academic performance, even when controlling for innate ability.<sup>7</sup> However, early adolescents may face challenges during the transition, and families may feel ill-equipped to balance expressing confidence with providing appropriate and effective assistance. Because early adolescents may not be open with their families about their lives at school, teachers and counselors must communicate to families the necessary information about how early adolescents can be more successful. Families can then reinforce those messages at home.<sup>15</sup> Improvement messages are a particularly effective type of school-to-family communication. An improvement message equips families with specific information about what an early adolescent can do better and an affirmation that they can improve.<sup>18</sup> Research has demonstrated that improvement messages from school to home support families in providing wraparound care for the academic and behavioral progress of early adolescents. "Improvement messages [are] overwhelmingly 'actionable,' slightly longer, and more likely to address things outside of class that parents [can] monitor such as making up missing assignments and studying," and these tend to inform student-family conversations at home.<sup>18</sup> (p. 5) When families receive information from the school that is actionable, family-teacher relationships strengthen, families are supported in using autonomy supportive practices at home, and early adolescents' motivation and engagement increase.<sup>18</sup> Research has demonstrated that improvement messages significantly and positively affect homework completion, classroom behavior, and participation in class.<sup>18</sup>

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS & COUNSELORS CAN USE:**

- Focus messages to families on concrete, actionable topics such as missed assignments and study needs. When behavior concerns are addressed, be clear about what action step the early adolescent can do to get back on the right path.
- Survey families at the beginning of the year to determine each family's preferred method and time of communication.
- Be proactive and address concerns when they are small and resolvable.
- Contact families on a regular basis so that all families receive contact with specific improvement messages.





## Strategy #5

### Encourage families to approach homework with positivity.

Homework can be challenging at any age but perhaps particularly at the middle school transition when early adolescents are adjusting to a new educational context, juggling multiple teachers' expectations, and developing a greater desire for autonomy. In fact, this is a time when students may develop a fixed mindset (discussed above), may feel helpless, or may become contentious over what they perceive as heavy-handed control from families and teachers,<sup>21</sup> all of which may have a negative impact on motivation and achievement. However, when families can maintain a positive mood and outlook on homework time, even if there are occasional lapses into frustration, early adolescents may develop more of a growth mindset, less helplessness, an increased sense of autonomy, and greater control over their emotions.<sup>21</sup>

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS & COUNSELORS CAN USE:**

- Design homework to be enjoyable and within the independent skill level of the students. Limit assignments which require heavy family involvement.
- Teach early adolescents strategies to calm down when anxious or frustrated (examples: positive self-talk, breathing techniques) and share these with families.
- Be clear about your homework expectations: purpose, amount, frequency, and how it will be communicated.
- Always emphasize with families that you want early adolescents and their families to enjoy homework time.
- Communicate with families how you can be reached for questions about homework.
- Invite feedback from families about how the homework process is going at home. Is it a manageable amount? How often do early adolescents feel frustrated during homework time? How often do early adolescents feel confident in their abilities to successfully complete their homework in a reasonable time?



## Strategy #6

### Partner with families to provide age-appropriate and supportive routines and structures.

Early adolescents crave independence at a time when they are still developing self-control and the ability to predict the long-term consequences of their actions. Therefore, it is a delicate balance for families and schools to work together to provide age-appropriate and supportive routines and structures.<sup>12</sup> Monitoring an early adolescent's behavior effectively means being aware without being intrusive and encouraging openness and honesty.<sup>12</sup> Because early adolescents are developmentally ready to start having more freedom, it is especially important for families to monitor an early adolescent's activities and unstructured time outside of school and on social media. It can be difficult for families and teachers to downplay their negative reactions when early adolescents open up about mistakes or poor decisions.<sup>19</sup> A trusting and supportive relationship is key. Family monitoring buffers against the harmful effects of high-risk peer relationships<sup>23</sup> and helps early adolescents reduce their extreme focus and attachment to peers, which in turn reduces the likelihood that they will engage in risky behaviors themselves.<sup>12</sup> Early adolescents also benefit from structure, like clear rules and expectations, predictable consequences, and clear rationales for these.<sup>12, 14</sup> In fact, when early adolescents are provided with supportive structure, they are more likely to think of themselves as competent, to be engaged in school, and to have higher grades. When families and schools partner together to provide supportive structure and guidance, early adolescents experience both affective and academic benefits.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS & COUNSELORS CAN USE:**

- Encourage families to monitor unstructured time outside of school. Provide tips and reminders in regular correspondence with families.
- Model collaborative creation of rules and consequences in the school setting. Through this process, discuss with early adolescents why rules are necessary. Explain to parents why this practice is supportive of early adolescents' developmental needs.
- Build trusting relationships with the early adolescents in your school and their families. When early adolescents have adults they trust, they are more likely to be open to guidance and to be honest about mistakes.
- Provide families with information about current social media platforms early adolescents are using and ways families can monitor their early adolescents' online behavior.
- Raise awareness with families about typical risky behaviors that early adolescents may encounter. Collaborate with families to discuss proactively with early adolescents how to resist peer pressure and consider long-term consequences of actions.



## Strategy #7

### Collaborate to create a sense of belonging at school and at home.

The transition to a new middle school environment, often with new peers, teachers, and expectations, may lead to an early adolescent feeling anxious, insecure, and more likely to withdraw or act out.<sup>4</sup> However, even during times of stress, Positive Childhood Experiences—positive experiences with relationships during childhood—may promote health during adulthood and reduce stress-related illness in the future.<sup>2</sup> Positive Childhood Experiences, or PCEs, include early adolescents believing that they can talk to family about their emotions, feeling that their family stands by them during difficult times, participating in community traditions, feeling a sense of belonging at school and support from friends, believing that there are two non-family adults (e.g., teachers or counselors) who have a genuine interest in them, and feeling safe and protected at home. Families, teachers, and counselors can support early adolescents by being available in times of distress, providing security and comfort, and being personally involved with what is happening in their lives.<sup>5, 13</sup> When these supports are in place, early adolescents may experience fewer anxiety symptoms, greater control over their emotions, fewer difficulties with learning, and they may be less likely to act out inappropriately.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS & COUNSELORS CAN USE:**

- Share information with early adolescents and their families about Positive Childhood Experiences and how these benefit early adolescents now and in the future.
- Foster a sense of belonging at school through clubs and lunch groups; make sure that all students feel that they belong—not just the outgoing or popular students.
- Collaborate with families to ensure that early adolescents are developing healthy friendships. Ask families to check in about friendships and to inform school staff if their early adolescent is feeling lonely.
- Be an advocate for early adolescents you work with and let their families know you are available as a supportive adult outside of the home.



## Strategy #8

### Communicate and model confidence in the early adolescent's abilities.

Early adolescents are forming their identities, and the transition to middle school can be a time of reduced self-confidence, especially if early adolescents are not able to demonstrate and practice their growing independence.<sup>13, 20</sup> While it is important to provide support as discussed in the previous strategies, it is equally important to communicate and model confidence in the early adolescent's abilities. We need to provide specific feedback to early adolescents, helping them to see the connections between their efforts and their successes. One way to do this is by allowing early adolescents to have opportunities to develop useful skills and show responsibility at school and at home.<sup>20</sup> Early adolescents need their families to help them develop three "motivational resources" to help them be successful in school: the understanding that their actions are connected to future success or failure, the belief that they can carry out the actions necessary for success, and the belief that they are choosing the action for themselves that will lead to the successful outcome.<sup>13</sup>

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS & COUNSELORS CAN USE:**

- Provide opportunities for early adolescents to take on leadership roles at school and brainstorm with families about how adolescents can build their responsibility at home.
- Share tips for how early adolescents can practice the skills they are learning at school in their home and community.
- Implement student-led conferences: use family-teacher conferences as an opportunity for early adolescents to lead the conference and share work they are proud of and how they have grown as a learner.
- When passing back graded work, have early adolescents reflect on what strategies and actions they used to earn the grade. Encourage them to share these reflections with their families.
- Provide specific feedback on assessments; be sure to always provide some positive feedback—don't always focus on what's wrong with the early adolescents' work.
- Debrief behavioral mistakes with early adolescents so that they can see a connection between choices and outcomes. Treat these as an opportunity for learning.



## Strategy #9

### Value home-based involvement as the most impactful and developmentally appropriate form of family engagement.

Traditionally, family engagement is thought of as direct involvement on the part of the family with the school, through volunteering, contacting teachers, etc. However, numerous studies have demonstrated that the middle school transition requires a shift in thinking about family engagement. To summarize the previous strategies, we know now that home-based involvement (i.e., being involved with early adolescents at home) is the most impactful and developmentally appropriate form of family engagement at the middle school transition.<sup>13, 15, 16, 17, 22</sup> Families who are more directly involved in the school (as opposed to being involved at home) tend to be less likely to use autonomy supportive practices at home, which are shown to be beneficial to early adolescents' development.<sup>13</sup> Families' confidence in their early adolescents' potential to succeed predicts academic performance even when controlling for early adolescents' ability.<sup>7</sup> In fact, academic socialization—that is, “communicating parental expectations for education and its value or utility, linking schoolwork to current events, fostering educational and occupational aspirations, discussing learning strategies with children, and making preparations and plans for the future”<sup>15</sup> (p. 742)—is the most impactful and developmentally appropriate form of family support for early adolescents' education. Teachers and counselors can and should help families to understand effective family engagement at the middle school transition.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES TEACHERS & COUNSELORS CAN USE:**

- Share with families the variety of meaningful roles for their involvement described here.
- Tell families about the value of home-based involvement and express appreciation for their sometimes-unseen efforts.
- Communicate to families the needed information about how early adolescents can best navigate the middle school context so that families can reinforce these messages at home through academic socialization.
- Reframe the conversation when speaking to colleagues and community members about family engagement: Family engagement is just as important in middle school as in elementary, and family engagement must change from practices used in elementary schools to practices that effectively support early adolescents' developmental strengths and needs.
- Celebrate early adolescents' achievements with families—as partners in launching success.





## Reflections

Use this reflection tool to collaborate with your team to identify currently aligned practices and opportunities for improvement.

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Glow</b> What can we celebrate about our current work?	<b>Grows</b> What are our next steps?
1. Promote awareness of the changing developmental needs of early adolescents.		
2. Provide families with information about how to navigate the middle school context.		
3. Emphasize a growth mindset in the classroom, and provide families with ideas for how to encourage a growth mindset at home.		
4. Provide actionable and specific improvement messages to help families support their early adolescent.		



<p>5. Encourage families to approach homework with positivity.</p>		
<p>6. Partner with families to provide age-appropriate and supportive routines and structures.</p>		
<p>7. Collaborate to create a sense of belonging at school and at home.</p>		
<p>8. Communicate and model confidence in the early adolescent's abilities.</p>		
<p>9. Value home-based involvement as the most impactful and developmentally appropriate form of family engagement.</p>		



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