

The Family Connection

News to Use for families of young adolescents

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Eighth Grade DOES Count

by Jan Burgess, principal, Lake Oswego Junior High School, Oregon

Contrary to popular belief, eighth grade does count. Many students define “counting” as contributing to credits needed for high school graduation. By that narrow definition, only those classes that earn high school credit for middle school students, actually count.

The broader definition of “counting” for all eighth graders underscores the acquisition of knowledge, study skills, and habits of mind so crucial to readiness for and success at the high school level and beyond. In *Turning Points 2000*, Jackson and Davis note the following examples of habits of mind that support learning:

Looking for evidence – Asking questions of what we read or find in research. How do we know? What is the evidence? How credible is that evidence?

Identifying viewpoint – Whose perspective are we reading, hearing, and seeing? What other perspectives might exist if we changed our position?

Making connections – How is one thing connected to another? Is there a pattern in the evidence?

Considering alternatives – How else might it have been? What if? Suppose that?

Eighth grade is the perfect place to practice and master these crucial skills. Planning ahead and learning to manage time, breaking large pieces of work into smaller parts, and putting effort into projects are skills to develop before advancing to high school. In addition, finding the motivation to study ahead of time for tests, persevering on a complex project, asking teachers

questions at an appropriate time when a concept or assignment isn't clear, and finding a system for organizing and recording assignments, are also necessary skills for surviving high school. Finding time to read beyond all the literature assigned in English class and learning to balance school tasks with outside interests are also part of the equation for success.

Middle school is a lot like riding in a bumper car – a lot of things come crashing together, some planned and others happenstance. New friendships are formed, friendships dissolve; a six-week research project starts out well, but gets lost in planning for other tests and papers; spring happens; a test is missed that affects a grade; a new person becomes another best friend via a chat room. If, in the midst of all the unexpected bumps in the course of eighth grade, parents and teachers can work together to provide their eighth graders with the clear message that the work they are now doing is important, then we can send them off to high school with confidence in their readiness.

If parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators at both the middle and high school levels acknowledge the importance of making eighth grade “count”, perhaps fewer students will think it is OK to slide through middle school, saving their “real work” for high school.

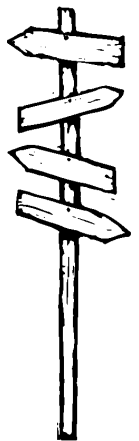


ParentsAsk

Question: It is a new school year and I want to be more involved with my seventh grade daughter's middle school. My daughter is adamant that she doesn't want me near her school. What should I do?

Answer: This is the “party line” for most middle schoolers who work very hard to keep home and school separate. Be considerate of your daughter's feelings, but let her know that being involved is what parents do. For that there is no negotiation.

You don't have to be intrusive, but don't hesitate to be involved in the school and be visible at sporting events, dances, and other social gatherings. Your daughter knows that you should be involved in her school and she will respect you for it. By the way, encourage other parents to get involved in the school, as well. Young adolescents whose parents are involved with their kids' schools learn more and achieve more in school – it is that simple!



→ The *Family Connection* is published by National Middle School Association as part of its ongoing commitment encouraging family and community involvement in the education of young adolescents. NMSA is unique among educational organizations because of its commitment to addressing the needs of middle level students – youth ages 10-15. Membership in NMSA is open to all persons interested in and concerned about middle level education. Teachers, administrators, parents, teacher educators, college students, and other educational professionals are well represented in NMSA's membership. Call 1-800-528-NMSA to receive further information about membership and middle level resources

Do You Want to REALLY Talk With Your Young Adolescent — Then Write With Her

Yearning for the moments when your child told you everything that happened in her life? Tired of the answer to all of your questions being “Nothing”? Think about starting a journaling relationship with your adolescent. It may start out as a way to communicate when you aren’t going to be home and need to leave an important message; or perhaps you leave a notebook where your son or daughter can check-in with you before leaving for a game or a lesson before you are home from work.



Start small and short. Then add a comment about a movie or a news story or tonight’s supper. Share an opinion, and ask for hers. Ask about a friendship that is new or one that seems to be struggling. It is often easier to put feelings down on paper — it seems anonymous and your child doesn’t have to look you in the eye when she talks about friends who are experimenting with risky behavior.

Mention that you noticed a change of clothing style or hairstyle and share a moment from your youth that brings back all of those feelings of being constantly “on stage”. Let your child know that you are human. It may be easier for you to share on paper, too.

Once you get the rhythm of journaling down, try some of these ideas to prompt your writings back and forth:

- Share a feeling, thought or idea that you have never shared with anyone.
- Write about a time you took a risk and what happened.
- Share a dream.
- Describe a frustrating moment at school/work.

After a few weeks of journaling, don’t be surprised if you feel more connected to your son or daughter. And if, just occasionally, you hear, “Could we talk about ...?” — you’ll know that it has been worth the effort.

TIPS Start Right From the Beginning

Young adolescents are not adults, nor are they high school students who are more independent. To succeed, young adolescents need adults — parents, teachers, significant others — who communicate about their needs, progress, and achievements. While communication is a two-way street, parents should take the initiative to meet teachers, counselors, principals initially. Here are some tips for establishing effective communication and keeping it going.

1. Don’t wait for the first official function of the school year to introduce yourself. Generally, the back-to-school open house is held in the first six weeks of school, but that is too late. Take a few minutes to stop by the school to introduce yourself to the principal and your child’s teacher(s), perhaps in late summer or in the first week or two of school. A short visit is best just to introduce yourself and say hello. Give the teacher(s) your name, phone number, and e-mail address, and encourage them to contact you at any time. Also, find out the same information from them and the best time to contact them — after school, during their planning period, or at home.

2. If your son or daughter is part of a team — which they should be in middle school — find out more. How many

students and teachers are on the team? Who is the team leader and what are his/her functions? Is there a preferred communication path for you to follow — telephone, e-mail, personal meetings? Does the team produce a regular newsletter? Is information available about the team, their expectations, and homework on a Web site or a school telephone hotline?

3. Stay in regular contact via e-mail or by stopping by the school at a time when teachers are not in classes with their students. While you may not have any concerns, teachers always appreciate parents who are attentive to their students’ needs. Should a problem or issue arise, this familiarity makes future contacts that much easier.

4. Offer to help chaperone a field trip, school dance, or participate in some activity where another person would be helpful. While your work schedule may not permit a lot of time for you to volunteer in school, there are many things that can be done to assist teachers outside of school. Help write a newsletter, secure materials for an upcoming unit, read papers, and many more.

What Middle School Students Say About Their Parents

When asked if their parents are positive role models for them, 78% of grades 6-8 students agreed or strongly agreed, with only 10% saying that they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

- 89% of middle level students agreed or strongly agreed that going to college is important to them.
- 91% of students agreed or strongly agreed that parents expect them to succeed.

When asked if parents and teachers talk to each other about them, only 50% of these students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

This information is from “Students Speak: My Education and My Future”, January 2000 State of Maine Statewide Summary for grades 6-8, Center for Research and Evaluation.

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