



Middle School Matters



Why we believe Middle Schools offer the outstanding opportunities for **YOUR** child.



Why Middle Schools?

Young adolescents, particularly from ages 9-13, grow and change physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially at a rate greater than at any other time in their lives, except birth to age two. In recent years, brain research and other studies have given us a wealth of information about what these young adolescents need and how they learn best.

So it is crucial that any education system offers a programme of learning that is developmentally responsive to this particular age and stage of young people's growth. Middle Schools are committed to providing educational experiences in these middle years (National Curriculum Years 5-8) that will support and nurture young adolescents in

- developing their unique strengths and talents as they discover their own distinctive personal identities
- sustaining and renewing a healthy sense of belonging to their families, their communities and society as a whole

Whether a child attends a Middle School as such, or the more traditional Primary/ Secondary system, it is essential that all concerned plan effectively for the unique educational needs of learners in these middle years. This guide is a starting point in helping you to understand why we think Middle Schools can do this best.

Throughout their schooling, children need to feel safe - physically and emotionally- before they can begin to develop intellectually. This is true of young adolescents as well. So an essential first step for those of us involved in educating these pupils is to foster a school climate that nurtures and supports them at a time when they are especially vulnerable.

To understand what pupils in these middle years need to be successful learners, we need to first understand the key characteristics of young adolescents:

- rapid, uneven physical, intellectual, social and emotional growth and development
- sharp uncertainty and self-doubt
- intense curiosity and a wide range of intellectual pursuits, few of which are sustained
- a need to belong and contribute, which will take unhealthy forms if they can't find healthy ways to fulfil this
- a need to feel respected, especially when they are being guided to make appropriate choices
- a preference to interact with peers during learning activities
- a preference for active over passive learning experiences
- a strong sense of justice and an alertness to anything they perceive as unfair



A suitable learning environment for learners in these middle years builds on their natural stage of development

To be developmentally responsive, educational environments for pupils of this age must be grounded in the needs of early adolescents.

- the climate of the school is safe, inviting, caring and personal
- the school culture recognises and acknowledges the existence of any bullying and works relentlessly towards its elimination
- the school culture fosters the development of individuality, while at the same time helping pupils develop their sense of community
- the school fosters pupil voice and choice
- pupils are taught in a range of groupings, both mixed-ability and based on achievement, according to need
- the school offers strong pastoral support and guidance as an essential part of its approach. There are opportunities for pupils to talk about the things that are bothering them. They are guided to express frustration and anger appropriately and to resolve conflicts without insult or injury to themselves or

others

- everybody who works in the school is committed to its ethos and its limited size enables each pupil to be known individually
- a rich programme of sport and the arts is present both within the curriculum and alongside it
- co-operative learning is one of the fundamental teaching strategies
- pupils have many varied opportunities for leadership and community service
- the larger community around the school is also involved in a variety of ways



...certain characteristics are essential in teachers who work with pupils in these middle years

It takes a special sort of teacher to work with young adolescent learners

From experience, we know that certain characteristics are essential in teachers who work with pupils in these middle years, to really meet their learning needs:

- teachers who make a conscious choice to work with young adolescents
- teachers who collectively demonstrate a wide range of personalities, academic specialities, skills, talents and interests
- staff who understand that who they are and how they act is even more important than what and how they teach
- teachers who can maintain their self-control while guiding and redirecting
- teachers who believe that all pupils have many strengths and talents and that all pupils can learn
- staff who display optimism, resilience, flexibility and a sense of humour
- staff who share a commitment to involving families in the education of young adolescents, by keeping them informed of pupil progress and school matters and by giving them meaningful roles in the schooling process
- teachers who are knowledgeable about, and committed to, teaching young adolescents and use a variety of teaching strategies
- leaders and managers who support the idea that teachers in Middle Schools are unique individuals who excel at working with young adolescents on a daily basis

How do we structure Middle Schools to maximise learning?

Middle School education must be organised in a way that best supports the needs of pupils. Effective practices in creating an excellent Middle School learning community include the following:

- the physical aspects of the school building accommodate teams and provide spaces for both large and small groups

- the number of pupils in the school building is limited to an optimum number: Middle Schools tend to be small enough for everyone to be known personally
- the school works in teams both within year groups and across year groups, in subjects
- the staff practice shared decision-making: the people closest to the pupils are involved in the decision-making process
- pupils have the opportunity to explore a wide variety of areas of interest, both in and out of the classroom, and to develop pathways for future study
- movement around the school is kept to a minimum, especially for younger pupils
- there is a balance of subject area specialist teaching with a generalist model to focus on student contact and relationship building
- a teacher, or small team of teachers, functions as the main point of contact for each pupil
- pupils have a limited number of teachers with whom they have daily contact
- regular contact with parents & carers is paramount
- guidance and support is available for each pupil, with clear and simple ways to access it
- special attention is paid to transition from First School or on to Upper School with orientation days and group visits to bridge the gap
- a positive connection is built between the school and the community through partnerships, service opportunities and use of community resources
- a wide variety of extra-curricular opportunities is offered in sport, music, art, drama, etc. as well as trips, clubs and social events
- the curriculum is balanced between the subject-centred and pupil-centred needs of the young adolescent;
- the school understands the importance of health and physical fitness for all pupils and provides a curriculum based on those needs
- there is a built-in structure to meet the needs of those pupils who are not learning
- the curriculum promotes self-esteem and self-knowledge as fundamental to building adolescent identity
- Information Technology, Literacy and Numeracy are integrated across the curriculum

...hands-on, experiential lessons that enhance pupil engagement


What can my child expect from a Middle School learning experience?

- they will find the learning engaging
- they will be involved in their learning and have choices
- they will relate what they are learning to their world and focus on issues that are important to their age group
- their teachers will make sure the lessons are intellectually stimulating
- they will experience a range of learning styles and teaching methods
- they will undertake a variety of activities and strategies within each unit of work
- teachers will provide constant feedback and check their understanding
- teachers will take time to review the information taught and make sure their pupils are taking it all in
- the approach to teaching and learning will support and value the relationships between teachers and pupils
- teachers will take responsibility for all aspects of their pupils' well-being: social, emotional, intellectual and physical
- teachers will present information in hands-on, experiential lessons that enhance pupil engagement
- teachers will understand that activity-based learning is more effective at this level than "chalk and talk"
- lessons will reflect the unique characteristics of the emerging adolescent
- assessments will be varied in format and based on discovering what each child can achieve
- learning will be supported in many and varied ways
- the teaching and learning will foster higher-order thinking skills
- pupils will have high expectations for their learning and achievement
- partnerships between parents, carers, pupils and teachers will help to foster learning
- teachers will use their own professional skills and learning to seek out and experiment with new ways and tools to assist in delivering the best possible curriculum
- teachers take the time to get to know their pupils well and support their learning and development



... a caring and structured environment in which every child can develop





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