



the family connection

News to use for families of young adolescents

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Parents Want to Know...

What is the best combination of grades for a middle level school?


For elementary age children and high school age adolescents, the options are fairly limited—to elementary and high schools. But, young adolescents, ages 10 to 15, are often found in a variety of schools with different grade configurations. While research indicates there is no *one* best configuration, every different combination has advantages and disadvantages for young adolescents' learning. Here are several of the most common.

- **K-8 schools**, where students stay together for their elementary and middle school years. Advantages: The lack of transitions from school to school and the opportunity to have a school community for nine years. Disadvantages: K-8 schools often do not have the wide range of course offerings in areas such as art, drama, foreign language, and computers.
- **Separate middle level schools** (whether called middle school, intermediate, or junior high school) usually include grades 5-8, 6-8, or 7-8. Advantages: These schools should be designed around the unique learning needs of 10- to

15-year-olds—active and engaging learning opportunities for all students, at least one adult who knows every young adolescent well, opportunities to explore a wide variety of both core and elective subjects, and preparation for high school that build on successful middle level practices.

- **K-12, 7-12, or others.** Advantages: Potentially, continuity and consistency in program and relationships. Disadvantages: When middle level and high schools are together, often the middle level becomes the “country cousin,” receiving less priority than the high school. In some instances, the high school practices, often inappropriate for young adolescents, are adopted or pushed on the middle level.

While any school with any set of grades *can* provide the proper environment, young adolescents deserve the same attention paid to their schooling that younger and older students receive. Whatever the grade configuration, how students are treated, the chances they have for close relationships with peers and teachers, and the opportunities they have for being engaged in high-level work are three key components in any middle level school.



Parents Ask

Q: My 13-year-old daughter is spending more time in her room. I know she wants privacy, but should I be concerned?

A: Young adolescents often feel that they are “on display” to the world. They are convinced that people are always watching them (and not others), whether at school, out in the community, or when they are involved in activities. While this is not true, the fact that they feel this way is, nonetheless, important. After a busy day at school, they need some alone time when they can just let down and be themselves—no worrying about what they say or how they look or act. For many, home becomes a safe refuge, particularly their own rooms. Do recognize your young adolescent’s need to have some quiet time and a private space. Respect her privacy in her room—never enter without knocking. However, do not allow her to retreat to her room for inordinate amounts of time. She is, after all, a member of the family, with responsibilities and obligations.

Coming of Age: The Education & Development of Young Adolescents

A resource designed to help you better understand your child

by Kenneth Brighton

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Does Your School Have These Critical Elements?

The school year began a few months ago; most beginning-of-school issues have been resolved; and, the end of the year is a long way off. Now is an excellent time to take a look at three key elements in your young adolescent's school. Keep your eyes open for the following:

- 1. Depth of curriculum.** This is a critical one, given the propensity today for schools to spend too much time on test preparation. The middle school curriculum should be much more than a series of separate subjects. It is a chance for students to learn critical skills, study relevant content, and develop habits of mind that become lifelong tools. While most middle level schools organize curriculum into traditional subjects and some electives, opportunities for cross-curricular study and in-depth, meaningful, interdisciplinary projects may be the most engaging and the best learning opportunities. In either case, "less is more" when it comes to curriculum. Studying fewer topics with more depth will increase learning.
- 2. Acceleration.** All students should have opportunities to explore topics in-depth—not just the best students. Acceleration is different for every student in every subject and, while gifted and talented, International Baccalaureate, and honors programs serve a certain student population, they do not meet the needs of all students. The fallacy of "pull-out" programs is that they ignore the possibility for students to accelerate (or slow down) as needed in the regular curriculum. A strong middle level curriculum allows numerous opportunities for students to explore important issues and questions through independent study or small-group work, where not everyone does the same thing. Think acceleration through flexibility.
- 3. Organization.** How are students and teachers organized? Do students move from one class to another every 50 minutes, as you did in high school, or are they part of a team of students and teachers that provides consistency by staying together for at least a year? A team where students work closely with a small group of teachers is key to providing the environment that young adolescents need, where they are well-known by one adult, and a group of teachers are attentive to the learning needs of the group. But not all teams are created equal. Really good teams have teachers who work well together, respect each other, and have a common set of goals. These qualities carry over to create a respectful and caring community of learners.

Tips for Parents



ABCD Parenting Young Adolescents (www.abcdparenting.org)

offers information and support to parents and professionals. The site provides information about the ABCD program and answers to frequently asked questions about young adolescent development, common problems (chores and responsibilities, homework, money, decision making, setting limits), and much more.

Help Parenting Tweens, Preteens and Young Adolescents Ages 10–14 (www.parenting.org/tween/index.asp)

is a service of Girls and Boys Town parenting.org. A handy Web site with information about typical young adolescent issues—meeting new people, transitioning back to school, quick tips for parents, and a useful archive of past articles on more topics.

Web sites with valuable resources for parents



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 to 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.

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