

SUPPORTING OUR MIDDLE SCHOOLERS



STUDY CIRCLES DISCUSSION GUIDE

January 27 - March 7, 2025



www.sheridancvc.org

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

STUDY CIRCLES PROCESS 4

DISCUSSION SESSIONS

SESSION ONE—Making Connections
*How are we connected to our community
and to middle schoolers?* 5

SESSION TWO—Create a Vision
How are middle schoolers doing in our community? 7

SESSION THREE—Study the Problem
What are the challenges for middle schoolers? 10

SESSION FOUR—Find Solutions
How can we move from words to action? 12

SESSION FIVE—Plan for Action
Moving to action 14

ABOUT EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY 16

Introduction

People in communities across America want to live in a place where they have the chance to thrive. This is true in all kinds of places: small towns, rural areas, urban neighborhoods, and others.

It is a familiar story that middle schoolers feel isolated or cut off from their community. Rural, urban and suburban communities may react differently, but there are aspects to being a middle schooler that look the same in all places.

The view of middle schoolers may look different to each of us. The person with middle schoolers may find that their community does not offer support or understand their challenges.

Our community is made up of people who share their skills, experience and enthusiasm with friends, neighbors and our wider social network. It includes middle schoolers.

This discussion guide will help us talk about the kind of community we want to live in, where all people feel welcomed and connected. If we work on the inclusion of middle schoolers and those around them, we will have a better community.

We need to share our vision of what kind of community we want. We need to take action to change things so that all can thrive. If everyone works together, we can have a better community.

Why Use This Approach to Talk about Middle Schoolers?

Our community already has many things in place to support middle schoolers. But to move ahead, more of us need to be part of that work. In a Study Circles program, we can learn what others are already doing to for middle schoolers and how more people can get involved.

This approach to community change brings together small, diverse groups of people who meet several times to think, talk, and work together to address local issues, like supporting middle schoolers. The process works best when many small dialogue groups happen all at once, across a community.

First, people look at how middle schoolers have influenced them; then they talk about why challenges exist for middle schoolers to thrive. Finally, each Study Circle works on ideas for action.

When we work together this way, we can bring new life and ideas to existing efforts in our community. We can also learn about needs that have not been met. Together, we can figure out how to do even more.

The goal is increasing awareness and making positive change in the community!

The Study Circle Process

In a Circle, each session builds on the one before it. This guide is a tool to help us look at how middle schoolers are supported in our community and create change where needed.

Here's how the dialogue works:

Session One: MEET EACH OTHER

- Get to know each other
- Talk about how we're connected to the issue
- Begin to look at the challenges for middle schoolers

Session Two: CREATE A VISION

- Talk about what our community looks like for middle schoolers
- Create a vision of a community where they thrive

Session Three: STUDY THE PROBLEM

- Talk about the challenges for middle schoolers

Session Four: FIND SOLUTIONS

- Talk about ways that the community could be supportive of middle schoolers

Session Five: PLAN FOR ACTION

- Talk about assets in our community
- Talk about how to make our ideas from Session Four happen

THE ACTION FORUM

March 12, 6:30-8:00 p.m. at The Hub on Smith.

After the 5th session, all the facilitators will meet to collect action ideas from all of the Study Circles. At the Action Forum, people can sign up to participate in an initiative or to learn more.

SESSION ONE: “Making Connections”

How are we connected to our community and middle schoolers?

Let’s set the stage for our dialogue. Today, we will share our own stories and views.

Some people will want to act and not just talk. Our whole dialogue will build toward action and change in the community.

Goals for this session:

- To create ground rules for discussion
- To get to know each other
- To talk about how we are connected to middle schoolers
- Begin to look at issues for middle schoolers in our community

Part 1: Overview of the Circles (10 minutes)

Before we begin, we will spend a few minutes talking about how the process works.

Read through Study Circle Process Chart on Page 4.

Please remember: we ask that you commit to this Circle for the two hours and all five weeks. We understand that things come up, but ask that you make a commitment to this issue and this group for this time.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this conversation is to learn from one another and to hear each other’s perspectives as well as to feel heard. It is not to problem-solve, persuade, debate, or convince each other of our positions. This dialogue is intended to support our community as we talk about challenges middle schoolers experience.

HOPES FOR THIS DIALOGUE

We hope that you get a chance to reflect and speak deeply about your own experiences and values and listen to others’ experiences with resilience especially when you hear something that might differ from your viewpoint.

We hope that you will come away with some new understandings about what is important to others and a clearer understanding of what is important to you; and that this may make space for further conversations that will support the work in the community.

Part 2: Our Hopes and Concerns for This Dialogue (15 minutes)

What do we expect from this process?

1. What are your hopes as you begin this dialogue?
2. What are your concerns?

Part 3: Guidelines for This Dialogue (15 minutes)

The facilitators help make sure the talk goes well and is useful. They do not take sides or take a position. There are many questions in each session. We do not have to cover every question. One way to make this space safe for everyone to speak openly is through a communication agreement. This is what we propose:

We will...

- Allow people to Pass/Pass for Now.
- Honor confidentiality.
- Not sharing what you hear in a way in which the speaker could be identified without the speaker's permission.
- Speak for ourselves.
- Not speak for others, nor ask anyone to speak for anyone other than themselves.
- Express our different viewpoints in a thoughtful and respectful manner.
- Share the airtime – make space for everybody to contribute.
- Not to interrupt except to indicate that we cannot hear a speaker.

Part 4: Making Connections (60 minutes)

Before we get to the question of what we can do, it is important to understand the issues and how they affect us. We all have personal experiences that inform and motivate our actions. It is important to share more about those experiences and discuss why we care about middle schoolers. In doing this we can relate to each other better and develop a common understanding that is foundational to creating community solutions.

Each person in the dialogue will answer these questions:

- Why did you come today? What concerns you?
- What do you hope this dialogue will lead to?
- Tell a story or give an example to show how your background or experiences have affected your ideas about middle schoolers?
- Why is the success of middle schoolers an important or not so important issue in our community?
- What other personal or community factors should be taken into consideration when talking about middle schoolers?

Part 5: Closing (20 minutes)

- How did it feel to take part in this conversation?
- Did you hear any common themes?
- What new insights did you gain from this discussion?
- What do we still need to talk about—what areas do we want to be sure to cover in future discussions?
- Is there anything you'd like to change for the next session?
- Are we still comfortable with the level of confidentiality?

SESSION TWO: “Create a Vision”

How are middle schoolers doing in our community?

In Session One, we talked about our connections to the community.

Goals for this session:

- To look at our community from the viewpoint of middle schoolers
- To think about how to improve our community and create a vision where everybody thrives

PART 1: What Is Life Like Here for Middle Schoolers?

(15 minutes)

Think back over the time since we last met.

What conclusions did you reach about what it might be like for a middle schooler and those around them to live in this community?

PART 2: A Vision for Our Community (60 minutes)

Review Current Services

- What services and support do you see available for middle schoolers?
- What activities in the community do you see or experience as making a positive difference for middle schoolers?
- Where do you see gaps between the needs and services provided?

Discussion Questions

- What do you imagine people in the community who aren't in this discussion might add or share that hasn't been shared yet?
- What is happening in other communities that might work here?

Building a Vision

It is the year 2030. This community is a wonderful place for middle schoolers, their families, and those around them to live and succeed.

- What is the community like? How does it work?
- How do middle schoolers spend their time?
- What role do they play in the community?

We need to find words of hope to describe our vision of our community when it is thriving. **Look at the box below. It has some words that might describe this community. The facilitator may ask someone to read the ideas out loud.**

Brainstorm words to add to this list. Which three words matter the most to you?

Things You Might Find in a Thriving Community

Opportunity

Everyone has an equal chance to succeed. There are local resources and opportunities for all.

Respect

People treat each other fairly. They allow others to live the way they want to.

Order

Things run smoothly. People do what they are supposed to do.

Safety

People feel secure. They aren't too worried about crime or drugs. They don't think their things will be stolen or damaged.

Prosperity

The community is growing and the economy is strong. Businesses are successful, and there are plenty of jobs that pay enough.

Health

People are healthy and it is easy to get to good healthcare.

Diversity

There are all kinds of people in the community. They come into contact with each other often. They can all work together and help each other.

Spirituality and Culture

People feel connected to something larger than themselves. They understand their culture and keep it alive in their day-to-day activities. People take pride in who they are.

Now, you will form groups of three or four. In your small group, talk about:

- What do the words mean?
- Which ideas matter most to you?
- How would others feel about them?
- What ideas would you like to add?
- Try to come up with a list of three words that your group can agree on.

Return to the whole group and talk about your ideas.

Each small group will read their words and say what they mean.

- Which words or ideas are alike? Which are different?

Try to agree on five words.

(The facilitator will list them on a piece of paper labeled Our Community Vision.)

- Which other words do you want to save for later?
- How do you feel about this list of words and ideas?

Imagine what it would be like to live in a place like this.

PART 3: What needs to change? (45 minutes)

Look at the list of ideas under Our Community Vision. As a whole group, talk about these questions:

- In what way is our vision of the community different from the way things are today?
- What would we like to change?
- What roles would middle schoolers and those around them play in changing the community?
- What roles might other people play - family members, schools, local businesses, local government, etc. - in changing the community?
- In our community, who might think this vision seems out of reach? Why?

For the Next Session:

- Think about the words we chose for our vision
- See if you can find some examples of these ideas in the community
- Look and listen for ideas about what we could do to improve the situation

SESSION THREE: “Study the Problem” What are the challenges for middle schoolers?

Goals for this Session

- To talk about what we want in our community
- To look at different ways to make our community a better place for middle schoolers and those around them

In Session Two, we talked about our vision for the community. We also talked about what the community looks like for middle schoolers.

Now we will look at how we can actually begin to think about making changes.

PART 1: Getting Started (15 minutes)

1. What examples of our community vision did you find since our last meeting?
2. What gave you hope? Why?
3. What made you sad or upset? Why?

Later, we will talk about solutions. But before we can figure out what to do, we need to look at the different viewpoints about middle schoolers as well as ways that other communities are approaching this issue.

PART 2: Why Do Some Middle Schoolers Struggle Here? (90 minutes)

Facilitator will hand out the fact sheet.

Here are some viewpoints about middle schoolers and those around them. One view cannot tell the whole story. You may agree with some of them or you may disagree. **Someone will read the views out loud.**

View #1

Middle schoolers seem to cause trouble wherever they go. They are disrespectful of people and property.

View #2

The middle schools in our county are doing a good job with kids and meeting them where they are.

View #3

The rural nature of our location makes kids feel isolated and like there’s nothing for them to do.

View #4

The teachers and counselors are overworked and undersupported. Kids fall through the cracks constantly.

View #5

Middle schoolers are quirky, funny, and interesting. It’s fun to watch them figure out who they are.

View #6

Parents and guardians should do a better job caring for and watching their middle schoolers.

View #7

Middle school was hard for everybody. They just need to get over it.

Discussing Views

We will use the following questions to help us talk about them:

- What viewpoints are missing? What would you add?
- Which views are closest to your own? (you may agree with more than one)
- What life experiences or values have shaped your views?
- Think about a view you don't agree with. Why would someone agree with that view? Try to come up with reasons to support that view.
- Do some of these views surprise you? Why?
- Which views conflict with each other?
- If we want to achieve our vision, which views support that vision?

We will talk about solutions later. For now, if you think of a way to support middle schoolers, ask the facilitator to write it down on a list of Action Ideas.

Closing (5 minutes)

- Did you hear any common themes?
- What new insights did you gain from this discussion?

For the Next Session:

Think about these views about why middle schoolers may not be supported in our community. See if you hear these views from others in the community. Who has these views?

Session FOUR: “Find Solutions”

How can we move from words to action?

Goals for this session:

- To review and summarize earlier conversations
- To develop ideas for action

We’ve talked about how our community is doing. Now, we will explore some ways to improve things. What approaches will work well? What will help us create a community of vision for middle schoolers and those around them?

Part 1: Getting Started (10 minutes)

What did you hear in the community since our last meeting? Did anything surprise you?

Part 2: Considering Different Approaches (80 minutes)

The following is a list of ways to improve life for middle schoolers. We will talk about each one, and come up with our own ideas.

Someone will read each approach out loud. The facilitator will write down our Action Ideas as we come up with them.

Approach 1: Reduce negative attitudes about this age group by teaching strategies for positive interactions with middle schoolers, and raise awareness about the importance of their ability to thrive

Stigmas such as discrimination, devaluation and stereotyping of middle schoolers are clearly apparent in our society. According to this view, we should promote the support and encouragement of middle schoolers. With inspiring, positive goals for kids and communities, we can create an environment that supports the changes we seek.

Approach 2: Support middle schoolers in mental health crisis situations

According to this view, we can teach others how to respond to people in crisis and provide responders with the knowledge and skills to address their needs. When family members, loved ones, friends, neighbors, and community members learn how to be helpful when a middle schooler is going through a difficult time, they can help that person avoid isolation and engage in the solution.

Approach 3: Support middle schoolers as they navigate and select local supports, activities, and services to meet their needs

Due to the complexity of schools and social care systems, services can fail to offer choice or meet their needs. According to this view, we can help middle schoolers access activities, supports, and services when they need them. Many different kinds of groups can be involved: public, private, nonprofit, and faith-based. Multiple youth-serving systems can work together to meet the needs of young people, including schools, law enforcement, and others. To support and sustain these efforts, we need to look for ways to take advantage of existing resources in the community.

Approach 4: Build connections throughout the community

According to this view, implementing multiple strategies will require us to mobilize all the different resources in our community. Other systems (juvenile justice, child welfare, early childhood), schools, health care providers, civic groups, individual volunteers, and many other people and organizations can all pitch in. By working together, we will also build the social connections that promote positive outcomes for middle schoolers. By focusing on this issue, we can strengthen our community and help address youth health and mental health in many ways.

Approach 5: Help youth, families, and communities promote positive behaviors and outcomes

According to this view, we must focus efforts on activities that promote positive behaviors and prevent substance use and risky behavior. We need to focus on interventions designed to prevent or delay negative outcomes.

Use these questions to think about the different approaches:

- Which approaches do you like best? Why?
- What other approaches can you think of?
- What is already going on in our community that reflects these approaches?
- Which approaches won't work? Why?
- Which approaches might help us get closer to our vision?
- Have we already tried any of these approaches? If so, what happened?

PART 3: What Are Our Best Action Ideas? (30 minutes)

Let's think about some of our ideas for action generated from our conversations about the approaches.

Setting Priorities

- What five or six ideas seem most realistic and useful?
- Who would work with us on these ideas? Are they things we can really get done?
- How have you experienced or seen these work before? Which other communities are trying them?
- Which approaches can be readily implemented?

For the Next Session:

Think about the approaches. Choose one approach and see if you can find it in the community.

SESSION FIVE: “Plan for Action”

Moving to Action

In this session, we will move to action. First, we will look at the assets we have.

Goals for This Session:

- Talk about the assets in our community
- Talk about how to make our approaches from Session Four happen

PART 1: What Are Our Community Assets? (30 minutes)

To begin our discussion today, we need to make a list of our assets. Every group and every person has them. We can use our assets to deal with issues like middle schoolers thriving.

Use these questions to find out about our community assets concerning middle schoolers:

- What are some things you know a lot about?
- What are some pertinent skills of other people in the community?
- What groups do you belong to? How can they help?
- What organizations in the community impact middle schoolers? How can they help?
- What assets do we have — like technology, education, events, human capital, or even money?

The facilitator will write our answers under Community Assets.

PART 2: Connecting Our Action Ideas with Our Assets (35 minutes)

Look at our list of Community Assets. See if any assets link up with our action ideas.

For example, one action idea may be: “Create a Teen Support Group.” Here is how we could connect this to some assets:

Problem: The public does not have an understanding of teen mental health struggles and the stigma that surrounds them.

Asset: Teachers, coaches, and parents want to support the teens in any way they can.

We can link these things together.

Think about other kinds of links you can come up with. Doing this will lead to more ideas and remind you of new assets.

PART 3: Setting Our Priorities for Action (25 minutes)

Look again at our list of ideas for action. Now we are going to narrow it down to a few ideas we can work with. Then, we will come up with our final list for the action forum.

- Which ideas are easiest to get done?
- Which ideas might help middle schoolers and those around them feel supported in the community?

Pick two or three ideas that seem useful and ask yourself the following questions:

- What would it take to make this happen?
- What community assets could we use to move this idea forward?
- What would our next steps be?
- What kind of support do we need to take these steps?
- Who else could we link up with?

Choose up to three action ideas to take to the Action Forum.

Write these ideas under Priority Action Ideas on Our Community flip chart. They should be things we can do on our own, or in groups. People from other groups will also be bringing their ideas to that meeting.

PART 4: Getting Ready for the Action Forum (15 minutes)

When the dialogues end, we will all meet at the Action Forum. This is a large-group meeting at the end of the dialogues. Ideas from all the dialogues are presented at the Action Forum. There are usually several action ideas that many people support. To move these ideas forward, people form action groups or task forces. Some people may join these action groups. Some may choose to help in other ways. In dialogue-to-change programs that continue over time, more and more people get involved, and many kinds of action occur.

Choose someone to speak for your group at the Action Forum.

Please look at the Community Assets flip chart. These are some of the things we have talked about over the last sessions. We will review them with the facilitator to see how far we have come. See if there is anything you would like to add.

PART 5: Wrapping Up (15 minutes)

Thank you for taking part in this dialogue. You are making a difference in our community.

Please discuss these questions:

1. What has surprised you?
2. Has your thinking changed about these issues? If so, how?
3. How will you stay involved in supporting middle schoolers?
4. Is there anything you will do differently because of this dialogue?

Thank you for working to find ways to support middle schoolers and those around them.

ABOUT EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

Everyday Democracy was created as the Study Circles Resource Center in 1989 by The Paul J. Aicher Foundation, a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization. Since 1989, they have worked with more than 550 communities across the United States on many different public issues.

Everyday Democracy supports organizing across the country by bringing diverse groups of people together, helping them structure and facilitate community dialogue on pressing issues, and training them to use a racial equity lens to understand longstanding problems and possible solutions. They also work with Anchor Partners throughout the country, to expand their impact and create a democracy movement. Everyday Democracy is a project of the Paul J. Aicher Foundation.

www.everyday-democracy.org