

SUPPORTING OUR MIDDLE SCHOOLERS



STUDY CIRCLES
MIDDLE SCHOOL
DISCUSSION GUIDE



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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 may 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 people with 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, the facilitators will all 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?

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 this subject
- Begin to look at issues for middle schoolers in our community

Part 1: Overview of the Circles (5 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 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.

Part 2: Guidelines for This Dialogue (10 minutes)

The facilitators help make sure the talk goes well and is useful.

There are many questions in each session. We do not have to cover every question.

We will...

- Speak for ourselves and allow others to speak for themselves.
- Participate within the timeframes suggested by the facilitator and share airtime.
- Not criticize the views of others or attempt to persuade them.
- Not interrupt except to indicate that we cannot hear a speaker.
- Allow people to Pass/Pass for Now.
- Honor confidentiality and not attach names or any other identifying information to particular comments unless we have permission to do so.

Part 3: Making Connections (20 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. 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 this question:

- Tell a story or give an example to show how your background or experiences have affected your thoughts and feelings about being a middle schooler.

Part 4: Closing (5 minutes)

- With any remaining time, do you have any clarifying questions you'd like to ask each other?
- What are you thinking about?
- What do you want to learn more about?
- How did it feel to take part in this conversation?

For the Next Session:

What is it like for middle schoolers to be in this community? What barriers do you face?

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: A Vision for Our Community (15 minutes)

Review Current Services

- What services and support do you see available 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.

- How would you describe this ideal community for middle schoolers?

PART 2: What needs to change? (25 minutes)

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?
- In our community, who might think this vision seems out of reach? Why?

For the Next Session:

- 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? (25 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:

- 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?
- 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.

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?

Read the approaches in Session Four to prepare for next week's Circle.

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: Considering Different Approaches (25 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?
- Which approaches won't work? Why?

PART 2: What Are Our Best Action Ideas? (15 minutes)

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

Setting Priorities

- What three or four ideas seem most realistic and useful?
- Who would work with us on these ideas? Are they things we can really get done?

For the Next Session:

SESSION FIVE: “Plan for Action” Moving to Action

In this session, we will move to action.

Goals for This Session:

- Talk about how to make our approaches from Session Four happen
- Prepare for the Action Forum

PART 1: 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 would our next steps be?
- 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 2: Getting Ready for the Action Forum (5 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 3: Wrapping Up (10 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 taking part in these Study Circles!