

FACTS
for Parents!

UNDERSTANDING *the* MIND *of a*

MIDDLE SCHOOLER

*Using Brain-Based Science to Help Students &
Parents Make the Most of These Important Years*

Middle School.

It's a new and exciting season — one of remarkable growth and change for your pre-teen. They are learning how to better self-advocate, distinguish their strengths, and identify personal interests. As a parent, you know that these are important and sometimes challenging years. You want to be an anchor for your child — a consistent source of love and support as they build their identity.

But that responsibility can sometimes leave you feeling unprepared and anxious about what's ahead.

If middle school is on the horizon for your family, you've probably asked yourself the following questions:

What does the best learning environment for my child look like?

How can I stay connected to my child now and throughout their teenage years?

What can I do to ensure my child is safe physically, socially, and emotionally?

Will my child maintain strong connections to our family values as they grow in independence?

Understanding how your adolescent's brain is developing is an opportunity to know how to stay connected with them and encourage positive growth during these formative years. This e-book was designed to help parents and guardians like you who want to be prepared for what's ahead, so your family can look back on these years with fondness.

We'll look at important topics and questions, such as:

- Physiologically, what happens to the brain in early adolescence?
- Your pre-teen will have strong (and competing!) desires — how can they be met in a safe, fulfilling way?
- As a parent, what are some strategies for keeping an active (but not overbearing) role in your middle schooler's life?

If you are searching for a meaningful middle school experience that offers more than a bridge between elementary school and high school, take the next step and **attend a virtual information session and schedule a tour** with our admissions team. We look forward to meeting your family and exploring opportunities for your child to learn and lead at Columbia Academy.

Sincerely,
Jon Swider,
Head of School



FACT

During the middle school years, the area of the brain responsible for decision-making *is under construction.*

Fiction



Middle school students have little control over their behavior until the prefrontal cortex is fully developed.

The bulk of brain growth that occurs in the pre-teen years is in the prefrontal cortex, commonly known as the decision-making zone.

Fully developed around age 25, it helps us predict the consequences of our actions, mediate conflict, and set goals. While the prefrontal cortex is still being developed, students are working through how to navigate relationships, avoid being overly impulsive, calculate risk, and make wise choices that will help and not hinder their future opportunities. Many parents feel that their pre-teens are emotional and at times even irrational. This is because they are relying on another part of their brain — the amygdala — to process and problem solve. As the prefrontal cortex continues to develop, they steadily become more equipped to make sound decisions. Parents, teachers, and other mentors can help middle schoolers develop skills that enhance this growth.



How we help:

Foster Critical Thinking

Capitalizing on this period of rapid brain growth, project-based learning helps students analyze and assess information objectively. Teachers encourage students to discuss their thoughts and ideas by asking high-level thinking questions.

Encourage Goal Setting

At the beginning of the year, middle school students meet with advisors to set their personalized Smart Goals. As the year progresses, they meet every trimester to evaluate their progress and make adjustments.

Giving Students Choices

Through our Responsive Classroom approach, students take responsibility for their academic performance, behavior, and goal-setting. They are given autonomy to choose their projects and electives, as well as how they demonstrate what they're learning. Students get creative with presentations, including for annual events such as the Science Fair, Cultural Fair, and Biography Bash.

FACT

The average attention span of the middle school student is *less than 15 minutes.*

Fiction



Middle school students are unable to stay focused long enough to deep dive on any subject.

Remember when your child was a toddler who was into everything and seemingly couldn't sit still? ***Parents don't often anticipate their children going through a similar stage in early adolescence, but thanks to brain research, we know it's true.*** Some researchers have even pointed out that increasing technology use throughout childhood has shortened teens' attention spans, making it difficult for them to maintain interest in a single subject or activity for more than 10-12 minutes.



How we help:

We Mix It Up

Columbia Academy middle school students change classes, which introduces them to different educators and teaching styles. Each teacher has their own approach to keeping students engaged and actively learning, including sometimes moving lessons outdoors for a change of pace and scenery.

Avoid Screen Overuse

Technology is a powerful tool for learning, but middle school students need hands-on learning and human interaction more than ever. Our text-based curriculum, interactive instruction, and working in small groups mean less screen use and more face-to-face time.

Differentiated Instruction

When a teacher knows how a student learns best, that student has a much better chance of comprehending and retaining information and concepts. Our teachers find what works for each student, giving learners the confidence and support they need to excel in their endeavors.



FACT

Middle school students are eager to find their place in the world, strengthen values, and develop a strong identity.

Fiction



Middle school students tend to pull away from family values and toward peers.

Middle school is a very formative season of life. During these years, neural pathways in the brain are still malleable, which means students are quite literally developing their own identities as they ponder questions such as “Who am I?” and “Who do I want to become?” **What they need most is context to help answer these questions and encouragement as they explore what’s ahead.** Before they can decide where they’re going, they need a strong sense of where they’re from. This foundation fosters their development in a powerful way, and it is strengthened when alignment exists between home and school.



How we help:

Character Education

When you’re a middle schooler, it can be tough navigating relationships and decision-making. That’s why character education is part of our curriculum and culture. Each month, students explore a different virtue — citizenship, diligence, empathy, fairness, gratitude, honesty, kindness, mindfulness, patience, and respect — with teachers leading active, thought-provoking discussions.

Partner With Parents

We view ourselves as partners with families in the education of their children. We encourage families to be involved in their child’s learning, model and demonstrate enthusiasm for education, and take part in classroom activities and school events. We communicate regularly with families and our open-door policy means you can always connect with us.

Cultivate Conversation

Middle schoolers with a strong sense of belonging enjoy psychological wellbeing, and this is often fostered through quality conversation. Columbia Academy teachers establish trust with their students through supportive interactions, such as monthly virtue discussions and using their advisory time to ask questions or for extra help.

FACT

Intrinsic motivation drives success more than ever in middle school.

Fiction



Middle school students need to be bribed or have privileges withheld to stay motivated and on task.

When a child finds their “thing,” it’s easy for parents to see what intrinsic motivation looks like in action. Maybe your youngster spent hours in the sandbox, carefully digging, sifting, and excavating the day away. Or perhaps they were constantly tucked away with a book from the time they learned to read. Whatever the favorite activity was, you observed a high level of curiosity, a sustained interest, and a desire to keep coming back for more. ***As middle schoolers are exposed to increasingly challenging coursework, it’s important to help them connect their unique talents and passions with the learning experience.*** By linking what they’re learning with real-world experiences, they become creative, critical thinkers who are driven to make a difference.



How we help:

Emphasize Autonomy

Giving middle school students the freedom to choose goes hand-in-hand with teaching them to accept responsibility for their decisions. At Columbia Academy, they’re able to choose electives that interest them, from cooking to yearbook, and each student is given a planner to keep track of their assignments and time commitments, which sharpens their student leadership skills.

A Growth Mindset

Middle school is an important time to remind your child that making mistakes is part of the learning process. The goal of each of our classrooms is to ensure that each student feels supported enough in their foundation to take educational risks. The result? Student growth and a new appreciation for learning.

Responsive Classroom

Brain science tells us that middle schoolers are not motivated by threats of negative consequences but empowered to do the right thing through positive incentives and plenty of opportunities to see how good it feels to make wise choices. Our Responsive Classroom model emphasizes self-discipline, logical consequences, and learning from mistakes in every aspect of the learning process.

FACT

It is important for middle schoolers to understand *internet safety* and how *technology* can enhance (not enable) their learning.

Fiction



Technology only distracts middle schoolers and puts them at risk of cyber bullying or dangerous situations online.

Technology can have a positive, or negative, impact on your middle schooler's education and mental wellbeing. ***When used properly, it can be a resourceful tool that propels them forward in their studies.*** If abused, it can leave them feeling tech-dependent and defeated. It can also affect their sleep habits, stress levels, and cause feelings of anxiety and insecurity to develop. Setting up clear boundaries for when and how they use technology, and for what, can guide them to make positive choices.



How we help:

1:1 Technology

Each middle school student supplies a laptop for classroom use, which they're responsible for throughout the school year. Each device must have Google and Microsoft Office applications so students can familiarize themselves with these professional tools and resources.

Options to Explore

Middle school is the optimal time for students to try new things and see where they might want to invest more of themselves in high school and college. Columbia Academy offers a variety of electives utilizing the tools students need to explore, create, and dig deeper into different subject areas while also practicing proper research skills, keyboarding techniques, coding, and more.

We Put Safeguards in Place

As your child matures, you might start to feel unsure about the technology they are using. Firewalls are in place to protect your child from online wandering. Social media and personal phone policies clearly communicate the expectations of students, so you know what is expected of your child in school.



Building CONFIDENCE

during a season of rapid growth:

What does a Columbia Academy middle schooler look like?



Columbia Academy middle schoolers benefit from a challenging core curriculum, the freedom to choose from a variety of electives, leadership opportunities that instill confidence, and intentional, social-emotional programming that strengthens their character, ensuring they're well-rounded and prepared for those next steps.

100% of Columbia Academy students:

Enjoy the added benefits of a Humanities approach to studying language arts and social studies alongside each other in an extended class period, allowing for a deeper dive into content and cross-curricular learning



Participate in leadership opportunities



Engage in important life skills programming as they study a different virtue each month and participate in morning meetings



Benefit from weekly Music, Spanish, Art, Physical Education, Technology and Enrichment classes

Perform in our Arts Night each spring



Choose electives that are designed to introduce them to new hobbies and interests



Coordinate and execute service projects including:

- Howard County Food Bank Food Drive
- Grassroots Crisis Intervention Donation Drive
- Kids Heart Challenge



Growing the next generation of *thinkers* and *leaders*



Columbia Academy middle schoolers are challenged to be independent thinkers, empathetic and mindful people, and astute leaders. Our academic program is enriched with engaging extracurriculars that build confident pre-teens eager to understand the world of possibilities that await them.

Core Subject Areas

Math

Into Math curriculum

Science

Elevate Science curriculum

Humanities

Language Arts and Social Studies utilizing the Into Literature and Sadlier Oxford Grammar Workshop curricula

Special's Classes

Spanish, Music, Art, Physical Education, and Technology

Electives

Band

Chorus

Cooking

Creative Writing

Drama and Acting

Knitting

Photography

Printmaking

Stock Market

Student Leadership

Strategic Games

Yearbook

Activities and Clubs

Abrakadoodle

Ballet

Cheer

Chess

Girls on the Run

Intramurals

Jazz

Robotics with Stemtree

Soccer Shots



Ready to *make the most* of middle school?

Explore all Columbia Academy has to offer!

Visit columbiaacademy.com/admissions, where you can:

- Discover admissions events and information sessions
- Find out how to schedule a personalized campus tour
- Register for admissions events

Contact us at 410.312.7415 with any questions.

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