

The Middle School Habits: Preparing Students for School and Life

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As we look forward to Middle School conferences this week, we thought it would be a good time to remind our community of the Middle School's Habits of the Heart and Mind and Habits of Learning. The foundation of our Middle School experience and central to our values as educators, the Habits provide important infrastructure to guide both teachers and students along their shared educational journey. Here at Menlo, they are prominent in every academic class as well as arts, athletics, and advocacy.

They help students learn to study more effectively, find joy in collaborating with their peers, and even better understand the positive ways they can engage with the world and contribute to their communities. As ambitious as that may sound, anyone who interacts with the Middle School on any given school day—visiting a class, observing a science experiment, watching a discussion group, or simply spending time out on the quad—will see the Habits in practice.

The Habits have been a source of strength and support for our students and faculty alike ever since they were implemented nearly six years ago. The Habits may not have been as visible during the pandemic; and yet, we believe our students who were equipped with the Habits were better able to adapt and lean on these tools through such a challenging time. With students back in the classroom, fully engaged, and face-to-face with their teachers again, we are renewing our emphasis on the [Habits](#), and we hope you will partner with us to bring these values into your family time as well. With that in mind, here's some more background on our Habits.



When we think about the Habits, what do we mean? “The Habits” are shorthand for both Habits of the Heart and Mind and the Habits of Learning. Middle School is an ideal time to introduce the Habits to students because their brains are the most malleable they’ve been since infancy. This is when children experience the second-most heightened time of neuroplasticity, so to be able to incorporate these Habits now is important. We call them the Habits, but they don’t become actual habits until students have utilized them in their work during all three years of Middle School.

Habits of the Heart and Mind

The Habits of the Heart and Mind is a shared value system that allows us to teach to the whole child. It enables us to approach curriculum from different perspectives and tailor instruction by reminding students of this important framework that can facilitate a healthier approach to learning while creating a one-on-one relationship with each student. This framework also gives teachers and students



some anchor points to talk about these more nuanced values and frames them in a way they can understand. We are constantly discussing them, reinforcing them, and even weaving them into classroom instruction, projects, and assessments across the entire middle school.

The Habits are:

SELF AWARENESS

- Consciously knowing one's strengths, emotions, and character

ETHICAL BEHAVIOR

- Acting with integrity and moral values

EMPATHY

- Understanding and honoring another's emotions and point of view

CURIOSITY

- Questioning, exploring, and understanding the world beyond ourselves

COLLABORATION

- Working with others toward a common goal by listening, sharing, and reflecting

RESILIENCE

- Recovering and growing from challenges

While these values are prominent in all of our courses, our [Human Skills](#) curriculum is one place we particularly focus on the Habits of the Heart and Mind. As a comprehensive wellness curriculum designed to help students become their best selves, Human Skills provides a forum for us to navigate the socio-emotional, personal, and cognitive milestones they may experience as middle schoolers. Topics covered in sixth grade focus on providing a smooth transition to middle school. Seventh grade focuses on healthy school-life balance. Eighth grade covers sexual health and effective leadership.

The Habits can help students to identify their emotions and how those emotions are affecting their thoughts and their behaviors. We'll give them a prompt and say, "Well, what do you all think?" because they also want to hear more from each other than adults at this stage. We always say, "Listen to your peers because you are the experts on what it's like to be a middle schooler."



For example, we'll have one student who will say, "I was actually really nervous about this presentation I had to do in History class." Then, you'll see another kid, like a spark from across the room: "Oh! I was nervous too!" Identifying those feelings, making them known, and being validated—that their peers in the room might be experiencing the same thing—alludes to that self-awareness and understanding that they're in this together.

These Habits are a lot easier to adopt when you practice them over and over again. Over time, they become almost unconscious. Instead of pausing to consider, "Am I being self-aware?" or "Am I being empathetic?" they become almost instinctual and easier for them to do. Students at this age are also at a time in their development when their abstract thinking is growing. They are moving from black-and-white thinking to those gray areas, which allows us to have important discussions with kids about "What is empathy?" It's not just putting yourself into other people's shoes. There needs to be action behind it. You always have to ask yourself, "Am I acting with empathy? Am I being a good collaborator?"

The Habits of Learning

At the Middle School, we believe part of preparing students academically means helping them learn "how to do school" and how to do it effectively. The Habits of Learning provide a framework for students to not just "do school," but to become fully invested in their own learning. Many of the skills that students need to be successful as they advance in their schooling need to be taught explicitly. The Habits of Learning help us do just that. The Habits of Learning are:

LEARNING ATTITUDE

- Identifies strengths and areas of growth
- Accepts and seeks challenges
- Exhibits independence
- Demonstrates resilience
- Practices self-advocacy
- Completes work with attention to detail

ORGANIZATION

- Brings materials to class
- Follows directions accurately
- Manages time efficiently
- Organizes documents
- Completes assignments on time

COLLABORATION

- Contributes productively toward group work
- Builds on others' ideas
- Steps up and steps down appropriately
- Offers and receives feedback from peers

ENGAGEMENT

- Listens actively
- Stays focused and on task
- Participates regularly
- Asks questions and makes connections
- Contributes positively to classroom culture

Through these Habits, we teach students how to manage their time, how to actively study for an exam, stay focused, listen, collaborate, and even explain what good sleep versus bad sleep does for their learning.

Similar to how our Human Skills class serves as an important vehicle for teaching the Habits of the Heart and Mind, our [Learning Seminar](#) curriculum is centered on the Habits of Learning and helps students become fully engaged learners. In the seminar, students develop the necessary organizational, self-advocacy, time management, planning, self-monitoring, and study skills to achieve success and take ownership of their own learning at Menlo and beyond. Human Skills and Learning Seminar are taken by sixth graders in their first trimester, seventh graders in the second trimester, and the third trimester for eighth graders.

Ultimately, the curriculum for the Learning Seminar—and our [Learning Support](#) team—are focused on empowering students to make informed decisions. To ask themselves, “Why am I doing something and why is it good for me?”

Or, “If I don’t do this, what will be the consequences of my actions?” We always tell students, “I’m not going to be there to tell you what to do when you get home.” The Habits of Learning are about giving them the information they need to make those informed decisions.

Over time they learn, “This has worked for me and this hasn’t.” They are, in a way, archiving that information so they have it available when they have to make a similar or related decision in the future. “Stuffing my paper in my backpack did not work well for me in sixth grade. Let’s try something different this year because that’s not who I am anymore!” Helping them and giving them the space to try different things is necessary because we can’t always just tell them what to do. Some things just don’t work for some students. So, we have to walk a tightrope: Here is the feedback you need, and here are some curated options that will be really helpful to you. Then, they can start filling up their own toolkit by learning from past experiences and the feedback they were given.

It’s also a space for students to have the time and help needed to process the feedback they have received from their teachers. For example, “What does it mean to score ‘proficient’ on this assessment?” Does that mean you’re good to go? Does it mean that you should push yourself a little bit more? Or, do you need to check in with your teachers for some help? The follow-up questions to that reflection, after they’ve been given feedback, help them to create these flow charts of decision-making they carry across campus. We’re hoping, as they progress through sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, there is less of a need to prompt them because they have internalized that flowchart to make healthy, responsive decisions.

The Habits come to life in those moments when a child breaks through and achieves something they never thought possible. It fulfills us as educators, and more importantly, prepares our students to move forward in their education with a skill set to succeed in a way that works best for them.

In Closing

As educators, it’s our job to make sure the whole child is nurtured and ready for whatever path they choose and prepared to contribute to their communities as joyful, ethical citizens of the world. The Habits are key as they help lay the foundation for our students’ future even beyond high school. If we can help them to discover their own gifts, focus on their strengths, stretch themselves, and inspire them to become lifelong learners, then the Habits have done their job.

