

3 Ways to Boost Middle Schoolers' Confidence in Class

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Classroom Management

Middle school is a distinct phase, and a school counselor has ideas for how teachers can draw out their students' best work.

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I heard Mara's muffled cries from the bathroom stall and weighed my options. I could give her privacy, or tell her I knew why she was crying and offer reassurance. I decided on a hybrid approach. "I'm going to give you some space," I told her from a few feet away. "But I'll come back in a few minutes to check on you. If you're worried about your presentation, I can help you. Lots of seventh graders think it's scary."

As I started to leave, Mara—not her real name—called out, "Wait! How did you know that's why I'm upset?"

I told her I'd learned to expect frayed nerves on days when kids recorded their Tiny TED talks, a speech about feeling defined by one strand of their personal narrative or one aspect of their personality. They might talk about what it's like to have a learning challenge or to be adopted, for example. It's hard for anyone to stand up in front of an audience, but it's especially difficult for middle schoolers. They have to perform in front of the people whose opinions they care about most at an age when they're likely to overestimate social risk and misinterpret feedback.

As a therapist and school counselor, I know that middle schoolers are a misunderstood breed. They often get lumped in with high schoolers or

treated like elementary school students, but middle school is a distinct phase we can't afford to neglect. If teachers can equip these students to take risks when they're at their most self-conscious and insecure, they'll turn out individuals who can lean into discomfort for the rest of their lives. Here are three ways educators can bolster tweens' courage.

1. Tamp Down the Pressure

Tweens don't do better [when they think the stakes are high](#). Brain scans show they can't prioritize or strategize like adults. They also lack life experience and perspective, and think in polarities. In an attempt to avoid failure, they might exhibit perfectionist tendencies, clown around, or shut down completely. They'll go to great lengths to avoid dropping a notch in a teacher's or peer's eyes.

To normalize failure, designate a regular time for students to share their most productive blunders. You can try a prompt such as, "The mistake that taught me the most this week was..." Publicly praise kids for taking a risk when they volunteer incorrect answers.

You can also try assigning different grades to separate components of a single assignment. On an essay, for example, you could assign separate grades for the outline, the rough draft, and the final product. And in group work, a child who dominates a project because they want to earn a top grade might loosen their grip if they know they'll also be graded on their teamwork. The idea is to put more emphasis on the process than on the product. If it's all about one final grade, kids might be tempted to conclude that they're "bad at writing" or "bad at math." When you break down the grades, they're more likely to internalize ideas like, "I'm excellent at setting the scene, but I need to work on incorporating more evidence."

Or try celebrating failure for an entire week, like the educators at Ivanhoe Girls' Grammar School in Australia. On Monday, every member of the faculty

shares their biggest failure, like flunking out of education school. For the next few days, the students learn skills such as reciting medieval poetry and juggling, something they have no familiarity with. They all perform their new skills at the end of the week in front of everyone, and they're all on equal footing and equally likely to look silly in front of their peers and teachers—no one performs the skills well. The experience teaches the students to find the humor in their most vulnerable moments.

2. Talk Above Their Age and Maturity Level

Middle schoolers are not high schoolers. They need modeling and scaffolding, but they also need to assert independence, exercise autonomy, and feel respected. To bring out their propensity to lead, give them a voice. When rules are inflexible, students will look for workarounds or rebel. But when they help generate policies around issues such as bathroom breaks or classroom seating, they take pride in their contributions and work to follow their own policies.

Talk to tweens as if they're older than they are to convey your belief that they can self-regulate and fix problems on their own. Research shows that kids will [rise to the level of your expectations](#). Initiate conversations about thorny ethical issues or complicated world events, ask them to help you solve a dilemma, provide opportunities to lead class discussions or teach peers, regularly invite their feedback, and give them the freedom to explore personal interests. You'll boost their self-concept and heighten their capacity for risk-taking.

3. Start With Small Exposures

Studies show that kids need [small exposures to extinguish phobias](#). For instance, if a student tends to freeze during quizzes and wants to take them in a separate room, the teacher could map out incremental goals: Perhaps the child first tries taking tests in the same room, but positioned so they're

less aware of classmates flipping pages.

Educators need to move the dial at an appropriate pace. If you push a child too far or too fast and it goes poorly, they might avoid that risk forever. If you don't push them at all, you'll reinforce their lack of self-efficacy. Ask them to rate their fear on a scale of one to 10, and then help them identify a risk in the four to seven range.

I took that gradual approach with Mara. After I coaxed her out of the bathroom, we discussed her options, including presenting to a few friends. She realized she was mainly worried that her mistakes would be captured forever, so the fix was easy: We skipped the recording when Mara delivered her speech.