



Skills Sheet for Caregivers: Middle School

Middle schoolers experience all the same complicated, wonderful, confusing, and big emotions that adults do. It's okay to feel all emotions, including feelings that are both pleasant and feelings that are uncomfortable.

Emotions are important because they provide us with information about ourselves and our environment, and they help us to connect with one another. Learning how to notice, label, and express feelings helps middle schoolers to feel more in control of their emotional experience.

Summary of the **KEY SKILLS** from the video:

- Label and name feelings to increase emotional vocabulary AND reinforce that you can feel more than one emotion at a time.
- Notice body sensations that are attached to different emotions and provide clues for what we are feeling. Sometimes it's easier to notice physical symptoms first.
- Rate the feeling of emotions on a scale of 1 to 10 to capture that we feel emotions in different amounts or intensities.

Practice skills

- Start by listening and validating your middle schooler's emotions before jumping to problem-solving or fixing what is wrong. For example:



"I see that you're feeling sad, and that's okay."

"I hear you feel angry and sad at the same time. That happens."

"It makes sense to feel excited and nervous!"

- Use specific positive feedback frequently, immediately, and consistently when your middle schooler identifies how they are feeling or recognizes someone else's feelings. For example:



"Great job recognizing that you feel nervous, and thank you for letting me know."

"_____, very nice job noticing you are feeling frustrated. I will take deep breaths with you to calm down our bodies."

- Make time to ask how your middle schooler is feeling, how much of that emotion they are feeling, and what they are experiencing in their bodies.

- When watching a TV show together, help your middle schooler identify where they feel emotions in their bodies by discussing how the characters in the show might be feeling.
- Discuss and label how you feel, how your body reacts to that feeling, and how much you feel it. It is a great way to normalize all feelings and send the message that feelings are important.

Start with this →

- Emotional validation is a foundational skill that caregivers can try at home that will help their middle schoolers to increase emotional awareness.
- Listening, reflecting, and connecting helps to increase your middle schooler’s awareness of their emotional experience and helps them to know that it’s okay to feel all emotions.
- Be mindful of the do’s and don’ts below when it comes to validation as you encourage your middle schooler to tell you how they’re feeling.

DO

Listen

Give your full attention.

Reflect

Say back what the emotion was that they shared. For example: “I hear that it was super frustrating.”

Connect

Tell them you understand. For example: “I can understand why you would feel that way.”

DON'T

Minimize Feelings

Avoid telling your child they shouldn’t feel a certain way. For example: “Don’t worry about it! It will be fine!”

Shame

Avoid using language that can lead to embarrassment for feeling a certain way. For example: “Why do you feel sad about that? You know better.”

Fix Right Away

Avoid jumping in with solutions. For example: “I’ll handle the issue with that other child. Don’t worry.”

On the next page there is an activity that you can share with your middle schooler. Do the activity together to help reinforce and practice the different skills for understanding feelings.



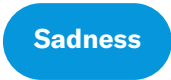
UNDERSTANDING FEELINGS

Practicing these skills helps you to increase awareness of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to improve your mental health and wellness.

Feelings Intensity and Body Response

Use this activity to help practice labeling feelings, rating their intensity, and identifying which body sensations you may feel with these emotions. First circle the ratings below to indicate how much you've experienced each feeling within the past week, with 0 being not at all and 10 being the most intense.

joyful	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
anxious	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
frustrated	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
fearful	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
depressed	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
calm	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
disgusted	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
content	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
hopeful	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10



faster heart rate	sweaty palms	clenched teeth	nausea
tension in neck and shoulders	slower heart rate	steady breath	more energy
stomachache	furrowed brows	clenched fists	shaky
tightness in chest	headache	pursed lips	urge to run
weakened or shaky legs	reddened or hot cheeks	shallow or quickened breathing	heaviness

Follow-Up

When you rate your feelings, you're gathering data about your experiences over the past week. If there are emotions that you're hoping to feel more or less, the skills reviewed in the additional videos and worksheets of this curriculum will help. You can use worksheets like this one each week to track your progress and figure out how the skills might be affecting your feelings.

Skills Sheet for Caregivers: Middle School

Middle school can be a stressful time for adolescents. While managing more challenging workload demands, they also grapple with anxiety brought on by larger issues like forming their identity and gaining independence. These emotions can be difficult to experience but are easier with relaxation skills.

As highlighted in the video, stress and anxiety often produce physical sensations due to our flight, fight, or freeze response. Effective relaxation skills like paced belly breathing help to calm the body and turn down the intensity of that emotion.

Below is a summary of **PACED BELLY BREATHING**, one of the key relaxation skills in the video.

- Belly breathing is breathing slowly and deeply at a steady pace. By slowing their inhaleds and extending their exhaleds, your child can use their breath to harness control of their emotions.
- Belly breathing balances out the carbon dioxide and oxygen in kids' bodies, cutting off their fight, flight, or freeze response. It returns their mind and body to a calmer state.

Practice skills

- When you notice that your middle schooler is feeling anxious, frustrated, or worried, encourage them to stop what they are doing and take a few minutes to practice taking paced belly breaths.
- Paced belly breathing for relaxation is different than breathing we do without thinking about it. If your middle schooler says, "I've tried that," encourage them to give it another try. Providing some information about why paced belly breathing helps may increase their willingness to try.
- Encourage your middle schooler to practice paced belly breathing when they are calm. They will be more prepared to use the skill in the moment they need it if they have practiced it beforehand.
- If you notice your middle schooler using paced belly breathing strategies make sure to provide positive feedback for their efforts.

Start with this →

- Breathe together! Take five minutes right after dinner or before bed to take some relaxing breaths together.
- Once you've practiced a few times together, bring in other family members. Ask your middle schooler to instruct siblings, grandparents or friends in paced belly breathing.
- You can also suggest your middle schooler utilize apps like Calm, Headspace, or Shine that help guide paced belly breathing.

On the next page there is an activity that you can share with your middle schooler or post in your home to reinforce and practice paced belly breathing.



RELAXATION SKILLS

Practicing these skills helps you to increase awareness of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to improve your mental health and wellness.

Paced Belly Breathing

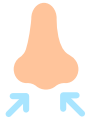
Breathing deeply into your belly helps to tell your body that you are safe and calm. Follow the instructions below and practice paced belly breathing when you are feeling calm and when you are feeling stressed or anxious.



- 1 Sit comfortably in your chair or on the floor either cross-legged or on your shins.



- 2 Place one hand on your belly and one hand on your chest.



- 3 Breathe in slowly through your nose for 4 seconds and feel your belly expand.



- 4 Slowly breathe out for 5 seconds through your mouth, letting the air gently leave your body.



- 5 Repeat 3-5 times, or for as long as you want.

Use the space below to think about times to practice paced belly breathing:

Before going to bed

Before taking a big test

Before sports practice

In the morning at school

After getting into an argument with a friend

Outside, sitting down, and enjoying nature



Skills Sheet for Caregivers: Middle School

Our thoughts can be overwhelming at times and cause us to feel stressed and anxious. As the middle schoolers in the video explain, it can be easy to get stuck overthinking and making things bigger in our minds than they actually are. That's why it is important to take the time to pause and remember that thoughts are not facts and that we can change them. Changing our thoughts can help us decrease our uncomfortable emotions and manage difficult situations better.

Below is a summary of the **KEY SKILLS** from the video.

- Thoughts are not always facts and are temporary.
- Thoughts can be either helpful or unhelpful.
- You can practice changing unhelpful thoughts to thoughts that are more realistic or helpful.

Practice skills

- Help your child to practice identifying unhelpful and helpful thoughts and describing how their thoughts make them feel.
- If you recognize that your child is expressing an unhelpful thought, encourage them to replace the thought with a more helpful or realistic thought.
- Model for your child by sharing your own personal examples of moments when you engaged in unhelpful thinking and how that made you feel.
- Use positive feedback when you recognize that your child has paused to consider their thinking.

Start with this →

- Ask your child the following questions to get them to be more aware of their thinking:



What thought are you having? Or: What were you thinking in that situation?

How is this thought making you feel?

Do you think this thought is helpful or unhelpful?

- Share some ways they can question their thoughts:

What are the facts about the situation?

What is the evidence that this thought is true or false?

What is the worst that could happen? If it does happen what can you do to handle it?

Is this thought kind to you? If not, how can you be fair to yourself?

- Remember that recognizing and changing unhelpful thoughts takes practice.

On the next page there is an activity that you can share with your middle schooler to help practice understanding and changing thoughts.



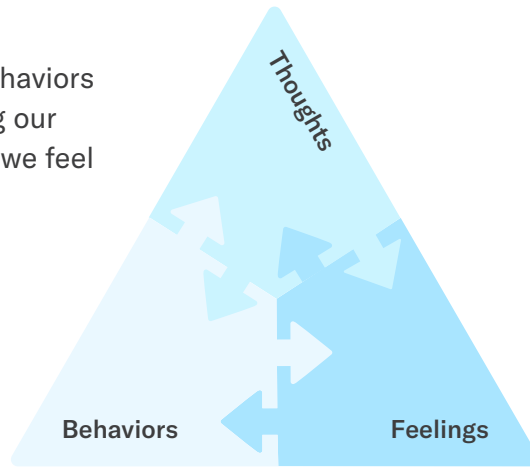
UNDERSTANDING THOUGHTS

Practicing these skills helps you to increase awareness of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to improve your mental health and wellness.

Challenging Unhelpful Thoughts

Remember thoughts are not facts, and sometimes thoughts are unhelpful to us. One way of practicing understanding your thoughts is by keeping track of them when you notice uncomfortable feelings. Below is a thought log. Practice identifying what was happening at the time, what your thought was, how you felt, and what you did. If you notice that the thought was unhelpful, try to change it to a more realistic or helpful thought, and then see if that would change your feelings and behaviors.

Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all connected. By changing our thoughts, we can change how we feel and how we behave.



Event	Unhelpful Thought	Feeling	Alternative/Helpful Thought

Here are some things you can ask yourself when trying to change your thoughts:

- What is the likelihood that this will happen?
- Is this realistic?
- What is the evidence that this is true?
- Is there another way I can think about this?

Follow-Up

When you notice how your thoughts are connected to how you feel, you're gathering data about yourself. If you notice that certain ways of thinking are not all that helpful or lead to uncomfortable feelings, remember that you have the power to slow down and consider when there might be other ways of thinking about the situation. The skills reviewed in the additional videos and worksheets of this curriculum can also help!



Skills Sheet for Caregivers: Middle School

It is not uncommon for middle schoolers to experience their emotions very intensely. As highlighted in the video, when emotions become intense, there is often an urge to do something connected with that feeling. Sometimes the urge might be to do something that ultimately makes them continue feeling overwhelmed or makes their problems bigger.

It's important for youth to know that intense emotions and the urges that come with them are common and they do not last forever. Middle schoolers can ride out intense feelings and urges by utilizing their five senses and different activities to ground them in the present and help them tolerate how they feel. Waiting for the intensity to pass also allows for greater control in choosing what they do next.

Below is a summary of the **KEY POINTS** from the video.

- Everyone feels big and intense emotions sometimes.
- Everyone has urges that are caused by big, intense emotions. The key is riding out the urge until the feelings have lessened.
- Middle schoolers can ride the wave by utilizing their five senses (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell) and by engaging in healthy distracting activities and being active (e.g., taking a walk, talking with friends, reading, journaling).

Practice Skills

- Validate emotions! Show that you're listening to your middle schooler and that you empathize with how they feel. This helps them feel understood and connected to you.
- Check in with your child to see how they are feeling, and ask if significant events are happening or may happen in the future that could trigger intense emotions. Being aware can help them to plan for these moments and utilize effective calming strategies.
- Discuss with your child how they can tolerate and get through intense emotions. This can include ways in which they can use their five senses in addition to being active and engaging in healthy distracting activities.
- Creating healthy habits that help middle schoolers to get enough sleep, eat healthily, and stay active can contribute to effectively regulating emotions.



Start with this →

- Practice those validation skills! As a caregiver, when you feel the pull to help your middle schooler solve a problem to make their intense emotions go away, start with validation instead to help them tolerate those emotions and know they can get through them.

- Model at home healthy ways of tolerating and riding out intense emotions. Encourage your child to use effective calming strategies that work, in addition to healthy activities such as going for walks, reaching out to friends, and being active.

On the next page there is an activity that you can share with your middle schooler to help them plan ahead and create a self-soothe kit that they can use to tolerate intense emotions.



MANAGING INTENSE EMOTIONS

Practicing these skills helps you to increase awareness of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to improve your mental health and wellness.

Self-Soothe Kit

You can use your five senses to self-soothe and help tolerate intense emotions. Use the guide below to create your own self-soothe kit.

You can carry this self-soothe kit with you so you always have what you need to tolerate intense feelings.

5 Senses	One thing that makes me calm and relaxed is:	Stumped on what to pick? Here are some suggestions:
See		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calming colors • A relaxing scene • Small picture of my favorite person, family member, athlete; or place to visit
Hear		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to rainstorm or ocean sounds • Recordings of funny jokes or comedians • Happy or soothing music
Smell		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good-smelling hand lotion • Small perfume bottle • A scented candle
Taste		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pieces of your favorite candy or other treat like gum or a mint
Touch		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satin ribbon or soft fabric • A small pompom or pouf • A small feather • A stress ball • Slime



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Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention on purpose to the present moment, without judging or trying to change your experience. The practice of mindfulness can help children to increase their self-awareness, self-control and attention. It can also reduce their emotional suffering and increase their compassion for themselves and others. Practicing mindfulness allows middle schoolers to see reality more accurately and without judgement. Regular practice will help to foster an increased sense of well-being.

Summary of **KEY POINTS** in the video.

- Mindfulness is an ongoing practice, just like daily physical exercise.
- There are three mindfulness skills for kids to focus on.
 - Observe: Notice, without words, what is going on in the environment or in their body
 - Describe: Name what they notice using descriptive and non-judgmental language
 - Participate: Throw themselves fully into an activity or experience

Practice skills

- Model for your middle schooler and schedule daily mindfulness activities for yourself. Invite them to participate with you when possible. Activities can include:
 - Take a mindful walk together. Encourage your child to use all five of their senses to observe their environment and then describe what they experience using non-judgmental language.
 - Practice paced belly breathing together. Every time the mind starts to wander to a thought, consider it an opportunity to practice mindfulness and bring your attention back to the breath.
 - Practice mindful eating at family meals. Rather than eating without thinking about it, encourage your child to slow down, notice the colors, smells, taste and textures of their food.
 - Put on some music and dance like no one is watching (or like you don't care if they are).
- Engage in mindful parenting. When you notice feeling stress when you are interacting with your child, slow down and be. Be mindful of thoughts, urges, and sensations that arise. Take a deep breath and bring awareness to your breathing body. Observe how the breath naturally brings balance to your body. Proceed as you have shifted to having a more mindful response.

- Keep a gratitude journal, and encourage your middle schooler to do the same. The mindfulness practice of bringing your attention to gratitude helps to increase compassion for yourself and others.
- It can be helpful to utilize mindfulness-based apps, including Headspace, Calm, Shine, and others to provide different guided activities. You can encourage your middle schooler to utilize these tools for their ongoing practice.

Start with this →

- When it comes to mindfulness practice, everything that is taught has to be lived. Encouraging your middle schooler to be mindful starts with you creating your own mindfulness practice.
- Start by creating and holding space for your mindfulness practice, and protect five minutes each day to engage in a mindfulness exercise. Talk about your intention with your middle schooler, and share with them your mindfulness practice.

On the next page there is an activity that you can share or even place somewhere in your house as a reminder to engage in mindfulness practice.



MINDFULNESS

Practicing these skills helps you to increase awareness of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to improve your mental health and wellness.

Mindfulness Skills & Activities

The more you practice mindfulness the more it will help our mental muscles to have better focus, attention, and awareness. You can choose from many activities below to practice the skills of mindfulness.



Observe
Skill



Describe
Skill



Participate Fully
Skill

Counting Breaths

Paced belly breathing

Listening to music and paying attention to one instrument

Going for a walk and naming what you see

Mindfully eating your favorite food

Playing an instrument

Journaling

Dancing

Using recommended apps to guide you:

- Calm
- Headspace
- Shine
- Mindfulness for Children
- Thrive for Alexa: Amazon
- Take a Chill
- OMG I Can Meditate