



Facilitating Successful Transition to Middle School

Implementing Effective Advisories

The Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center¹ (MHTTC) serves a six-state region. Funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration² (SAMHSA), the Center is focused on providing free training, products, and technical assistance to individuals serving persons with mental health disorders. Through the School Mental Health Initiative³, the MHTTC Network focuses on the implementation of mental health services in schools. Mountain Plains MHTTC School-Based Mental Health⁴ resources are archived online.



This product introduces the multi-tiered approach to mental health in schools and provides resources to use when developing or enhancing middle school advisory programs. It is intended to be used by school administrators, counselors, or teachers who lead advisory programs or are involved in developing curriculum for a middle school advisory program.

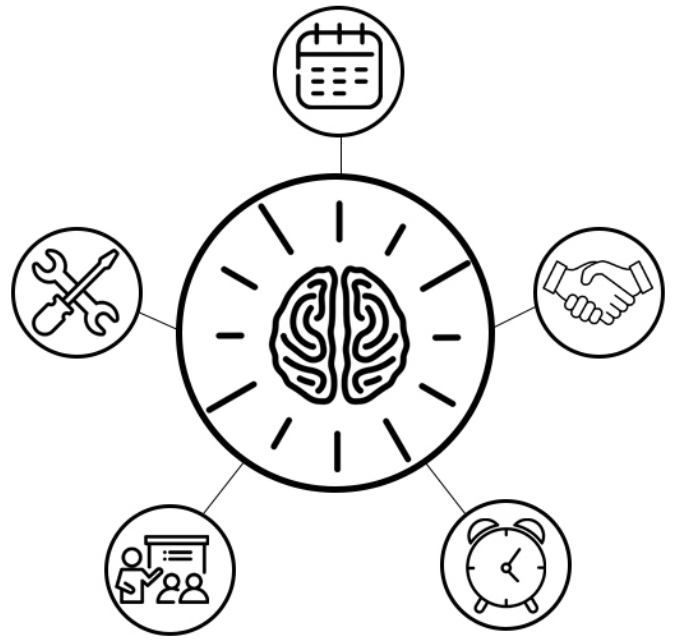
Introduction

Current literature indicates mental health challenges are increasingly prevalent among children and adolescents, with 15% of all individuals experiencing a mental health disorder before the age of 18.⁵ Adolescence is a period of time which presents an influx of change and stress to the person; putting the individual at heightened risk of experiencing mental health challenges such as depression or anxiety.^{6,7} Particularly challenging is the academic transition between elementary and middle school which presents increased social, academic, and environmental demands. Adolescents who undergo this transition often lack both the skills and the support to cope with these demands, which can lead to an increase in mental health challenges.⁶ Adolescents entering middle school face new teachers, peers, academic expectations, home expectations, and other environmental factors. All of these factors have the potential to result in decreased motivation and academic achievement, limited attachment to the school environment, low self-regard, sadness, and angst.^{8,9} Additionally, adolescents may exhibit a lack of coping abilities leading to an increased risk of experiencing mental health challenges during adolescence.¹⁰ Unaddressed symptoms of stress including attention deficits, cognitive disturbances, lack of motivation, and negative mood have all been found to adversely impact education during this time period.⁷



A Tiered Approach

Best-practice for schools includes a multi-tiered approach to mental health. The use of a multi-tiered approach promotes positive mental health among students, leading to decreased prevalence of mental health challenges and less-severe mental illness.¹¹ The three tiers of intervention include Tier 1: Universal, Tier 2: Targeted, and Tier 3: Intensive. Tier 1 focuses on the promotion of health and prevention of mental health challenges, which could include social emotional learning (SEL) programs and mindfulness programs. Tier 2 focuses on preventing mental illness and promoting well-being, but through the use of small and more directed group interventions that address specific mental health needs. Tier 3 focuses on specific students who are experiencing mental health difficulties. Within each of these tiers, there are specific interventions which have been found to be beneficial to different groups of adolescents within the school setting. Due to the complex and varying needs of adolescents, it is considered best-practice to include each of these tiers of intervention within the school setting.¹²



Barriers and Strategies

School personnel face many barriers when implementing interventions within the school setting. These barriers include limited school resources, varying degrees of parental support, mental health stigma, and educator and administrator support.¹³ Fortunately, many strategies exist to overcome barriers and promote successful middle school transitions. These include implementing a universal coping strategies program and targeted social skills groups, developing a fact sheet addressing use of advisory time in the school, establishing group protocol for advisory time, and holding an educational in-service about creating scheduled calendars. These strategies may all positively impact student transitions to middle school.¹¹

One universal school-based intervention that can be used to promote successful transitions to middle school is the effective implementation of school advisory programs. Advisory programs gather students into small groups which meet each week with a consistent group advisor. These programs are intended to fulfill identified student academic, social emotional, and interpersonal needs while providing consistent adult guidance and supporting healthy peer relationships.¹⁴ Students who are included in a high-quality advisory program often engage more in school-based events, require less disciplinary action from school, feel increased connectedness to peers, and have increased parental support.¹⁵ While many middle schools within the United States currently implement advisory programs during the school day, advisory activities do not always support students' successful transitions to middle school.

The authors recommend that the fact sheet titled *Strategy for Transition: Advisory Program* be used to gain an understanding of the recommended best-practices for advisory programs and topics that should be addressed during a middle school advisory program. For administrators and staff members seeking to create or enhance an advisory curriculum, the resource sheet titled *Developing an Advisory Program: Session Topics and Resources* may be used to identify resources which are currently available to support the development of a curriculum.

STRATEGY FOR TRANSITION: ADVISORY PROGRAM

HOW ARE ADOLESCENTS COPING WITH THE TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL?

- Adolescence is a period of time filled with many transitions. The transition from elementary to middle school comes with new academic, social, and environmental demands. Adolescents often lack the skills and the support necessary to cope with these demands, leading to an increase in mental health challenges.⁶ This fact sheet provides an overview of how to use advisories as an effective strategy for the middle school transition.



STRATEGY FOR PROMOTING SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS: MIDDLE SCHOOL ADVISORY TIME

- One strategy that is beneficial in supporting adolescents through their transition to middle school is the implementation of a school advisory program. Advisory programs gather students into small groups which meet each week with a consistent group advisor.¹⁴ These programs are intended to fulfill identified student academic, social emotional, and interpersonal needs while providing consistent adult guidance and supporting healthy peer relationships.¹⁴ Students who are included in a high-quality advisory program often engage more in school-based events, require less disciplinary action from school, feel increased connectedness to peers, and have increased parental support.¹⁵

BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL ADVISORY TIME

- Despite research outlining the benefits of advisories, there are many barriers to the effective implementation of these programs. Barriers include limited resources, school's resistance to change, limited staffing resources, lack of support or knowledge of advisory periods, and a lack of physical space.¹⁶

ADVISORY: BEST-PRACTICE

- Purpose & Goals:** Ensure that students have opportunities to form meaningful relationships with members of the school community and to enhance communication between the student, school, and caregivers.^{14,16} These relationships may be deepened while addressing additional student needs.
- Organizational Considerations:** Advisory programs should be organized in a way that best allows for the program's determined purpose and goals to be met.¹⁷ The four main aspects of organization include:
 - **Group size:** 10-16 students in each class.¹⁴
 - **Session time/space:** 3-5 meetings each week lasting 25-45 minutes each.¹⁷ Research shows that advisory programs meeting less than twice each week are valued less by both students and faculty.¹⁷
 - **Professional development/support:** Providing advisor in-services, training, and resources are among the most important factors of a successful advisory program.¹⁷
 - **Student ownership:** Providing students with opportunities to contribute to advisory decisions and take leadership within the program is important to increase student buy-in.¹⁷

ADVISORY CONTENT

- A high-quality curriculum should be used, and may vary based on the program's stated purpose and goals.^{14,16} See the *Developing an Advisory Program: Session Topics and Resources*¹⁸ document for resources on how to build a curriculum that meets the specific needs of your students.

RECOMMENDED ADVISORY TOPICS^{14,17,18,19}



Refer to the Advisory Building Checklist below to begin creating an effective advisory program!

ADVISORY-BUILDING CHECKLIST

- Identify main goal of advisory program
- Identify student needs
- Develop high-quality advisory curriculum based on student needs
 - Time management
 - Conflict management
 - Social emotional learning skills (SEL)
 - Coping with change
 - Mental health literacy
- Schedule consistent, predictable meeting times at least 3x/week for 25-45 minutes each
- Create groups of 15-20 students
- Schedule training and learning opportunities for advisors
- Develop annual evaluation for advisory effectiveness and satisfaction
- Provide students with opportunities to set goals and lead advisory

Developing an Advisory Program: Session Topics and Resources

This table of resources was created to aid in the development of a successful advisory program that will address the unmet needs of adolescents. The table below contains program plans, background information, and step-by-step tools which aim to increase mental health and academic outcomes in adolescents using effective advisory programs. Each resource is listed under its corresponding topic. Each topic included in this table is pertinent to include in a middle school advisory program curriculum.



School Transition



Conflict Management and Coping with Change



Time Management and Routine Building



Mental Health Literacy



Social Emotional Learning Program Implementation



Social Emotional Learning Areas of Competence



School Transition

Emotional and Social Development²⁰

This issue brief created by The Pennsylvania State University addresses social and emotional learning development in middle school. The resource highlights school transition and includes the middle schooler perspective.

Preparing for Middle School²¹

This website provides steps a parent or educator can take when preparing their child/student for middle school.

Making the Transition to Middle School²³

This fact sheet from the Department of Education provides multiple tips for mentoring during a student's transition into middle school.

Middle School Transition²²

A website that covers concerns by educators and parents on transition to middle school and how to address those concerns effectively. The resource also includes suggested guidelines to follow when planning transition programs for students.



Conflict Management and Coping with Change

School Connectedness²⁴

This publication defines and addresses school connectedness components and provides ways to implement strategies to increase social connectedness within the school setting for youth.

Preparing for Middle School²¹

School Tools provides 10 different conflict resolution lesson plans for educators to use when teaching students these skills.

Teaching Coping Skills²⁶

This website gives reasons why it is important to teach coping skills to students, when it is most appropriate to teach them, and ways to teach these skills in an effective way. It also includes multiple additional resources about how to teach coping skills.



Time Management and Routine Building

Time Management Lesson Plan²⁷

Students benefit from increased knowledge on how to effectively manage their time. This lesson plan helps students to not only understand the importance of time management, but also provides ways to teach them how to implement the skills in their daily lives.

Importance of Organization³⁰

How, why, and when should organization skills be taught to adolescents? This resource includes answers to each of those questions by providing effective strategies to increase students' understanding and ability to organize. It also includes additional resources one can use to implement teaching strategies for this skill.

Importance of Family Routines²⁸

Having a routine within the family helps to provide consistency and helps to decrease disorder and confusion. This article gives realistic tips for families to start implementing simple daily routines into their family life.

Importance of Schedules and Routines²⁹

A consistent daily schedule for children and adolescents provides comfort and stability in their lives. The purpose of this website is to highlight the importance of establishing roles and routines within the family.

Roles and Routines Lesson Plan¹⁸

A resource including five lessons on developing and implementing effective routines in middle school. This resource contains education on the various roles a middle school student plays and how to be successful in each of them.



Mental Health Literacy

Problems at School³¹

Why does mental health matter in schools? How do mental health difficulties impact students? Those are two important questions addressed within this article. Information about how to navigate mental health difficulties and the problems a student is facing is provided.

Promoting Student Mental Health³²

Accredited Schools Online provides in-depth statistical information about mental health difficulties in children and adolescents. It includes multiple resources about where to find help whether a student is going through depression, anxiety, ADHD, or other mental health diagnoses.

Adolescent Development³³

This resource provides an in-depth overview about adolescence including the emotional, physical, and hormonal changes they go through during this stage. It highlights how to notice signs that the student is struggling and what signs/ characteristics are typical for this stage of life.

Teacher Knowledge: Mental Health Disorders³⁴

This guide, created by Teen Mental Health, provides an in-depth overview for teachers about common mental health disorders and what signs to look for in students.

Ways to Foster Resilience in Students³⁵

This website offers 10 steps to take when teaching resilience to children and teens. It focuses on what resilience is and how it can be effectively taught.

Mental Health: Using the Right Words³⁶

Teen Mental Health created a resource explaining the importance of using proper terms and words when discussing mental health.



Social Emotional Learning Program Implementation

Effective Social Emotional Learning Programs for Middle School³⁷

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides a framework to assess SEL programs. It highlights programs that are effective and ways to implement them. The main purpose of this resource is to give educators a guide to implementing SEL programs in schools.

Schoolwide Program Implementation³⁸

CASEL provides an in-depth guide to schoolwide social and emotional learning. It highlights how to implement social-emotional learning strategies in schools.

Mental Health/Social-Emotional Well-Being in a Tiered Framework³⁹

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) provides a resource for assisting schools in addressing positive behavioral intervention and supports social and emotional learning.

Interactive SEL Framework⁴⁰

CASEL provides an interactive website where users can learn more about the five SEL competencies including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, decision making, and relationship skills.



Social Emotional Learning Areas of Competence

Understanding the Core Competencies:



The five resources above, created by PBS, include a video and handout illustrating the concept for school professionals who will aid in skill development in adolescents.

Promoting Self-Regulation in Adolescents⁴⁶

This practice brief discusses the importance of self-regulation for adolescents and how to support adolescents during the development of self and emotional regulation.

Instruction of Self-Advocacy Skills⁴⁷

This resource provides ways to teach self-advocacy to children and adolescents, specifically in an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) participation and technology use.

Teaching Social Skills⁴⁹

PBIS created a resource that addresses the importance of teaching social skills to adolescents and describes how and when to begin teaching these skills.

Social Skills Curriculums and Programs⁴⁸

This social skills brief gives tips to consider when choosing a social skills curriculum and/or program for students. It also provides a list of current and readily available social skills programs.

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