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## Seven Habits of Highly Effective Middle Schools

These seven habits are good for students, teachers, and the profession.

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by Sara Davis Powell

*“We are what we repeatedly do...Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”*

– Aristotle

Aristotle’s wisdom is pretty startling when you think about it. What we do speaks to who we are.

Middle school teachers can develop habits that define them—both as effective creators of developmentally appropriate learning environments for young adolescents, and as facilitators of learning characterized by academic rigor. However, there are basic tenets of effective teaching that must be in place before considering day-to-day habits.

The National Middle School Association (NMSA) endorses seven standards for middle-level teachers that address young adolescent development, philosophical foundations, and organizational components, curriculum and assessment, teaching fields, instruction and assessment, collaboration with family and community, and professional roles.

In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), Stephen Covey tells us that habits form at the confluence of knowledge, skills (performances), and desire (dispositions). Using what NMSA expects effective teachers to be and do within these three elements, we can develop specific habits that are good for your students and teachers, and for the profession. I suggest seven specific habits that complement and extend NMSA’s vision that principals and their teachers can apply at the middle level.

### **Habit 1: Begin with the End in Mind**

We often say that our students are “becoming.” They are wonderful human beings who are developing in tiny spurts and in large chunks each and every day. Habitually viewing them as they have the potential to be, particularly in the most trying moments, will help reinforce our respect for them. Remember that when we give respect, we often get it back.

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (1998) urge us to begin with what the product will look like, measured by appropriate standards. Although young adolescents are not products, they are becoming who they will eventually be in the adult world. When we picture them as self-confident, grounded individuals, we are better able—through our words and actions—to help them grow.

### **Habit 2: Approach Teaching and Students Positively**

Attitude is a choice. We can be optimistic and poised for positive events, or pessimistic and waiting for the proverbial next shoe to drop. Teacher attitudes may affect middle-level students more than at any other time. The roller coaster of emotions and the tilt-a-whirl of hormones often result in wildly fluctuating moods. Our consistent optimism and positive approach to life inside and outside the classroom will pay big dividends in terms of providing a safety net to catch our kids on their way down and buoy them back up.

### **Habit 3: Practice Wayside Teaching**

Wayside teaching (Lounsbury 1991) happens in the classroom, the halls, and the cafeteria, and at the bus stop, the choir program, the gym, the grocery store, and the mall. It happens everywhere we encounter students. In a lesson plan you won’t find, “Hey, Ashley, how are you?” or “Great job at the game last night, Tim!” or “I’m sorry to hear that your dog died, Marcus. I understand what that feels like.” Nor will you find instructions for a pat on the back, or a sincere smile, or a wink, or a trip to the hospital to visit a sick parent. All of these

gestures of care are meaningful to our students. The habit of tending to the little things can make a big difference to them.

**Habit 4: Listen Attentively**

I know it's hard sometimes to listen to the long tales and the short, sometimes incomprehensible statements voiced to us daily. We often don't understand what's behind the conversations our students have with us during class or in the other places and times when we encounter them. But one thing is certain—they don't always tell us about problems and dilemmas in order to receive our wise and sage advice, as much as we might like to give it. They often just want to know that we are listening—really listening.

**Habit 5: Show Students that Redemption Is Close, not Closed**

Students will make mistakes. They sometimes do it intentionally. They will try our patience. They will make their way up the consequence ladder. Remember, they are “becoming.” Young adolescents need the opportunity to start over and over again. They can't if we don't let them.

When they do something wrong, they need to know that forgiveness (or redemption) is available, and that tomorrow is a new day. This in no way means that our students should be able to escape appropriate consequences. It simply means they can begin anew and try again (Stevenson 2003).

**Habit 6: Handle with Humor**

Very funny things often occur in middle schools. Don't be afraid to laugh with your students (but not, of course, at the expense of others). We all have encountered sticky situations that would best be handled with a bit of humor. Try humor when a situation seems to be escalating. Then, watch it diffuse. After all, life is a whole lot more enjoyable when peppered with ample bits of humor.

**Habit 7: Invest in Self-Renewal**

To self-renew in the professional sense, talk with colleagues about ideas for curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Share what works in your school's classrooms and ask them to do the same. Read professional journals and books. Attend regional, state, and national conferences.

To self-renew in the personal sense, spend evenings and weekends with people you enjoy. Develop a talent or interest you've always pushed into the “one of these days” category. Nourish yourself. Be good to yourself. Reflect, learn, and play with equal gusto!

The saying goes, “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.” In the same vein, a middle school team is only as strong as its weakest member. Think about your own habits and the habits of your faculty. Are there habits you might change, give up, or develop? Could your team benefit from a sincere, growth-promoting huddle centered on helping each other recognize valuable productive habits as well as those that are counter to what's best for young adolescents?

These seven habits will help us more successfully measure ourselves against the sobering wisdom of Ginott (1993) when he wrote:

I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, a child humanized or dehumanized.

Be reminded continually of the awesome and serious responsibility we have to be role models as we influence the lives of adolescents. And remember the wisdom of Aristotle:

“We are what we repeatedly do...Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

### References

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