

WHY THIS MATTERS

Middle school is a time of profound change, both academically and personally. Student workloads increase, puberty begins, independence increases, and identities take shape. Each of these changes can be stressful. This stage is also a time for curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking skills to grow. Preparing tweens to manage stress and emotions before high school enables them to enter their teen years with skills that will protect their mental health long into the future.



WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

The middle school years (generally ages 10-14) are a particularly pivotal time for mental health. While independence is increasing in early adolescence, the brain's frontal lobe is immature, affecting cognition and self-regulation. The brain's frontal lobe – responsible for thinking, emotions, personality, self-control, and memory – is actively developing. The resulting combination of growing independence, puberty, and brain immaturity can make tweens vulnerable to stress, adverse events and mental health concerns.¹



HALF of all lifetime mental illness begins by AGE 14

In addition to the internal changes, middle schoolers are also managing increased academic responsibilities and shifting social dynamics. This complexity often results in emotional instability (mood swings) and increased stress.² Research is finding that social media use in early adolescence can harm mental health, especially for girls.³ All these pressures can lead to chronic stress that reshapes the brain, affecting learning, relationships, and health.

! **Suicide is the 2ND leading CAUSE OF DEATH for 10- to 14-year-olds.**

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN?⁴

Mental health outcomes for middle school students in Wisconsin are striking. Girls report anxiety rates 30 percentage points higher than boys. Approximately 55-60% of boys say they do not get the help they need when in emotional distress.⁵

Wisconsin high school students report that mental health topics and resources should have been more prevalent in their middle school years.⁶

The majority of WI middle school BOYS report they DO NOT get the EMOTIONAL SUPPORT they need.

A large majority of WI middle school GIRLS report ANXIETY.

Half of WI middle school GIRLS report BULLYING is a problem at their school.

WHAT WE CAN DO

● PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

- Accept and validate your tween's feelings. Discuss mental health openly. Ask [connection questions](#). Use everyday moments like car rides or meal prep for short check-ins rather than formal talks.
- Consider [Healthy Minds, Thriving Kids for Middle School](#) skill sheets and guides.
- Embed healthy routines, limit the number of structured commitments, prioritize sleep, and encourage in-person time with friends.
- Delay giving your tween a smartphone until until age 13. Keep all devices out of bedrooms at night.
- Practice critical thinking about digital content, algorithms, and curated identities found online.
- Support and model positive relationships.

● SCHOOLS

- Provide direct instruction on positive relationships, anti-bullying, and [social skills](#). Teach self-regulation skills and implement breaks for movement, breathing, or reflection to help students self-regulate.
- Regularly discuss how to build healthy habits, both online and offline.
- Teach students about the power of help seeking and identify who to go to when facing a problem. Use Wisconsin's [Mental Health Literacy resources](#).
- Consider a bell-to-bell tech policy and encourage in-person socialization.
- Prioritize outdoor recess with unstructured play time along with sufficient time for students to eat lunch.
- Use restorative practices to build connection, address conflict, and repair harm.⁷
- Screen students for mental wellness and provide follow-up supports.
- Offer a wellness club for students to learn about mental health and build a positive school culture.

● PROVIDERS

- Discuss brain development with children and caregivers to help explain growth, behaviors, and emotional changes (mood swings, sleep needs, risk-taking, etc).
- Implement a universal screening process into routine care visits.
- Use strengths-based language when discussing mental well-being with tweens.

● POLICYMAKERS

- Provide long-term sustainable school mental health funding.
- Invest in social emotional learning and life skills training (e.g. communication, teamwork, and stress management).
- Increase access to school-based and community mental health services.

● COMMUNITIES

- Create safe, affordable, welcoming spaces for tweens to gather, play, and build relationships.
- Reduce stigma through community education. Encourage organizations to be catalysts for youth-led mental health conversations.
- Strengthen partnerships and communications between schools, families, and community resources that focus on adolescent development.



WHAT HELPS

Name it: Building a robust emotional vocabulary helps to properly identify and understand feelings. Some kids at this stage of development may lack the language to talk about their feelings and mental health. Rather than *mad, sad, happy, and bored*, consider expanding the range of descriptors: *thrilling, anxious, frustrated, calm, disappointed, hopeful*.

Talk About It: Labeling your own feelings and validating that adolescents can have multiple feelings – often in one day – helps to normalize mental health conversations, and models how to make wellness part of daily routines. Adults should be curious and non-judgmental listeners. Ask open-ended questions.

Connect: Spending in-person time together with friends and family is crucial. These are opportunities for kids to practice both social skills and self-regulation skills. Make it fun, playful or silly – and, if possible, youth-driven.

Sources:

¹ [Adolescent development and risk for the onset of social-emotional disorders](#).

² [The neurobiology of the emotional adolescent: From the inside out](#).

³ [Windows of developmental sensitivity to social media](#).

⁴ Department of Public Instruction. 2023 Middle School YRBS, [County Results](#).

⁵ State-level data on middle school mental health are not available, though county-level data for some counties are available at DPI's [Conducting a YRBS](#) page.

⁶ [Students Spoke, We Listened: Starting Early](#).

⁷ Boyes-Watson & Pranis (2015). *Circle forward: Building a restorative school community*. Living Justice Press.



WISCONSIN OFFICE OF
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