

FACTS
for Parents

EXPLORING
the MIND of a

MIDDLE SCHOOLER

**Understanding Brain Development to Help
Students and Parents Make the Most of
These Important Years**



PARDES
Jewish Day School

MIDDLE SCHOOL

If middle school is on the horizon for your family, you've probably asked yourself the following questions:

- What does the best learning environment for my child look like?
- How can I stay connected to my child now and throughout their teenage years?
- What can I do to ensure my child is safe, physically, socially, and emotionally?
- Will my child maintain strong connections to my family values as they grow in independence?
- How can I be sure my child is ready for high school and college?

Most parents know that the middle school years are important, and often challenging. However, when it comes to understanding this unique developmental stage, there is much to learn. This e-book is designed to help parents like you who want to be prepared for what's ahead — and choose the very best atmosphere to foster your child's success.

We'll look at important topics and questions, such as:

- Physiologically, what happens during brain development in early adolescence?
- Your teenager will have strong (and competing!) desires — what are some ways you can meet those needs in a safe, fulfilling way?
- As a parent, what are some strategies for keeping an active (but not overbearing) role in your child's life as they get ready for high school?

It's a new and exciting season — one of remarkable development. With a few brain-based principles and some tried-and-true techniques, your family will look back on these years with fondness.

We invite you to take the next step and schedule a meeting with Pardes Jewish Day School. On our campus, the Kaufman Valdes Middle School is much more than a bridge from elementary to high school. It's a time of leadership, learning, and growth.

We look forward to sharing more about the opportunities available for your child.

Sincerely,



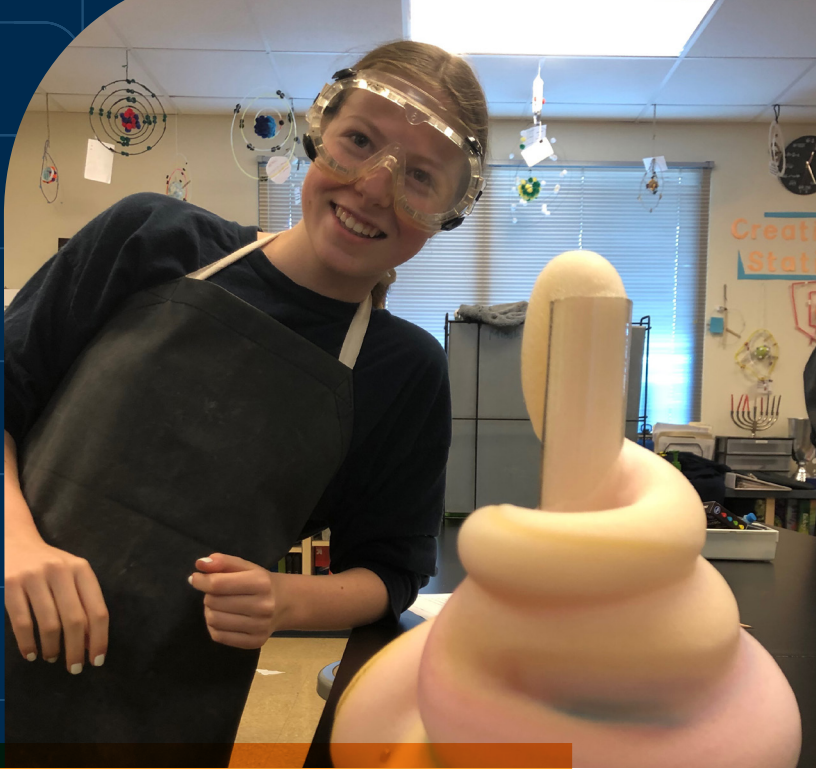
Lauren Kreisberger

Director of Admissions and
Enrollment Management



FACT

During middle school, your child's brain will develop decision making abilities.



Myth

Middle school students have little control over their behavior until this rapid stage of development concludes.

Middle schoolers experience a dizzying pace of development! The bulk of brain growth during these tween years occurs in the prefrontal cortex, commonly known as the decision-making zone. Fully developed, it helps us predict the consequences of our actions, mediate conflict, and set goals. While the prefrontal cortex is “under construction,” students are working through how to navigate relationships, avoid being overly impulsive, calculate risk, and make wise choices that will help, and not hinder, their future opportunities.

HOW WE HELP:

Foster Critical Thinking

Project-based learning prompts students to adopt an inquiry-based approach to problem solving. This further allows students to solidify skills needed for high school.

Encourage Goal Setting

Opportunities like our three-day annual retreat allow middle school students to reflect on their learning, set goals for the future, and make concrete plans to achieve them.

Utilize Interactive Modeling

Students learn by doing. Interactive modeling helps middle schoolers hone both academic and social/emotional skills through rehearsal. In Pardes' Advisory Program, students practice these skills daily with a trusted mentor in an emotionally neutral setting.



FACT

The average attention span of the middle school student is less than 15 minutes.



Myth

Middle school students are unable to stay focused long enough to dive deep into any subject.

Remember when your toddler was into everything and seemingly couldn't sit still? Parents don't often anticipate their children going through a similar stage in early adolescence, but thanks to brain research, we now know they do. Some researchers have even pointed out that increasing technology use throughout childhood has shortened teens' attention spans, making it difficult for them to maintain interest in a single subject or activity for more than 10-12 minutes.



HOW WE HELP:

Utilize Brain Breaks

Middle school students crave interaction and often require a change of pace to stay motivated. These brief and engaging activities get students moving, interacting, and recharged between periods of instruction.

Avoid Screen Overuse

Technology is a powerful tool for learning, but middle school students need hands-on learning and human interaction more than ever. We are mindful of digital health and safety and reserve screens for opportunities where they are truly beneficial.

Employ Differentiation

Small class sizes allow teachers to know their students well. This includes understanding their unique learning styles, strengths, and passions. Middle school students have a strong capacity for focus when their teachers reach them in a meaningful way.

FACT

A supportive environment is essential to helping middle school students thrive emotionally.



Myth

Middle school students struggle with stepping outside the box or trying new things.

This may seem obvious to parents, but it's worth noting that the emotional part of the brain advances at a slower rate than the intellectual part. During the pre-teen years, be aware that your child may struggle to correctly interpret others' emotions, leading to hurt feelings, overreactions, and generally feeling that things aren't "fair." School should be a place where students are always treated fairly, communicated with consistently, and aware of clear expectations and consequences.

HOW WE HELP:



Common Language

Using a consistent tone, common words, and a shared approach to teaching and training helps students know what to expect as they work with different teachers and subject areas.

Creating Safe Spaces

Environment matters, and students in middle school crave a sense of community, safety, and security as much as younger children. Pardes provides a culture of kindness where teachers model intentionality and students learn to communicate purposefully.

Failing Forward

Students must learn to view failure as an important part of the learning process and ultimately a contributor to their success. With this growth mindset, they have the confidence required to tackle new challenges and opportunities.



FACT

Middle school students are eager to find their place in the world, strengthen values, and develop a strong identity.



Myth

Middle school students tend to pull away from family values and toward peers.

Middle school is a formative season of life. During these years, neural pathways in the brain are still malleable, which means students are quite literally developing their own identities as they ponder questions such as “Who am I?” and “Who do I want to become?” What they need most is context to help answer these questions, and encouragement as they explore what’s ahead. Before they can decide where they’re going, they need a strong sense of where they’re from. This foundation fosters their development in a powerful way, and it is strengthened when alignment exists between home and school.



HOW WE HELP:

Foster Strong Identity

Students form personal connections and strengthen their own relationships with their Judaism at Pardes. From studying Hebrew and Jewish history to participating in Tikkun Olam, middle schoolers embrace Jewish values as foundational components of their identity.

Partner With Parents

Pardes Jewish Day School partners with parents to ensure there is a strong connection between each child’s home and school. Parents and even grandparents remain actively engaged in the school community.

Cultivate Conversation

Teens with a strong sense of belonging enjoy psychological wellbeing, and this is often fostered through quality conversation. At Pardes, students in the Kaufman Valdes Middle School program participate in our Advisory Program to build community and connection while developing social/emotional skills. Our full-time counselor helps each student learn strategies for effectively communicating their emotions.

FACT

Intrinsic motivation drives success more than ever in middle school.



Myth

Middle school students need to be bribed or threatened to stay motivated and on task.

Brain science tells us that middle schoolers are not motivated by threats of negative consequences or reward systems, but empowered by reinforcing language that recognizes and encourages positive behaviors. As students move through increasingly challenging coursework, it is important to let them have ownership in the learning process. When they find their “thing,” it’s easy to see what intrinsic motivation looks like in action — a high level of curiosity, a sustained interest, and a desire to keep coming back for more. Linking subject matter to real world experiences is key to helping middle schoolers recognize their skills and abilities as tools to make a difference.



HOW WE HELP:

Emphasize Autonomy

Traditional school environments often see a decline in student engagement in middle school. However, at Pardes, student engagement remains paramount as middle schoolers are given ample opportunities to foster confidence and responsibility in a safe environment.

Offer Voice & Choice

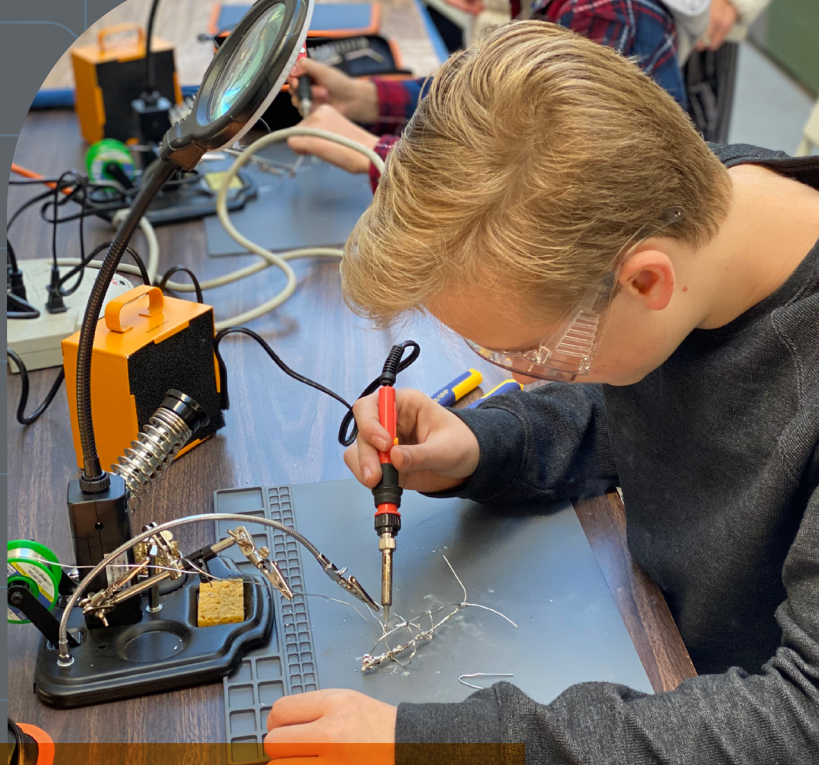
Middle school students need a say in how they spend their time learning and what they create. This is a key element of Project-Based Learning at Pardes. Students in the Kaufman Valdes Middle School channel their passions and opinions into tangible products, whether it be a working robot, a podcast, or a petition for change.

Natural & Logical Consequences

Our Responsive Classroom model emphasizes natural and logical consequences in every aspect of the learning process. This allows students to take responsibility for their actions, develop self-control, and become active problem solvers.

FACT

The brain of a middle schooler has a very high level of neuroplasticity.



Myth

Intelligence is fixed throughout life.

Neuroplasticity is an amazing thing. It describes the human brain's flexibility to develop new skills, adapt to change, and literally rewire itself throughout life. The middle school student is forming neural connections daily — even hourly — and creating unique pathways in the brain. For young teens, these connections form more easily and rapidly, which makes this an optimal season for learning. Middle school students should understand how their brain is developing so they can understand that they are in the driver's seat of the learning process. When they understand that they have the capacity to master even their least favorite subject, they are empowered to adopt a growth mindset for life.



HOW WE HELP:

Growth Mindset Training

Growth mindset is a research-based concept that has a powerful effect on the middle school brain. It involves teaching students how the mind works, and encouraging them to see that growth happens through challenge — not by sticking to things that come easy. With this mindset, they can step outside their comfort zones and stay motivated to learn.

Space to Create

The [MakerSpace](#) at Pardes is a designated area for students to move from knowledge consumers to knowledge creators. It is an environment where they can utilize a variety of tools to explore, create, and dig deeper in numerous subject areas.

Options to Explore

Middle school is the optimal time for students to try new things and see where they might want to invest more of themselves in high school and college. At Pardes, the Kaufman Valdes Middle School offers a wide variety of extracurricular activities, including athletics, arts, elective courses, and clubs.

FACT

Middle schoolers benefit from understanding how their physical, mental, and emotional health are interconnected.



Myth

Students in middle school lack the maturity to take ownership of their overall health.

Studies show that middle school students can be quite vulnerable to stress. The early-adolescent brain is especially sensitive to the negative effects of sleep deprivation, poor nutrition, dehydration, and remaining sedentary for too long. Solid routines at home and school are critical. Students need a healthy life balance between school, family, and extracurricular activities. They also need daily support to navigate the complexities of the teenage years — relationships, decision-making, identity development, and more. With trusted advisors, healthy outlets for relieving stress, and strong routines, they are able to thrive in the classroom and beyond.



HOW WE HELP:

Creating Balance

We recognize the importance of each student's hours outside of school. Quality time with family, engaging in hobbies, and simply relaxing are so important for middle schoolers. Our homework assignments are used to deepen understanding and foster routine.

Emphasize Respect

Kavod is one of our **core values**. Students are taught to respect others, value different perspectives, and treat themselves with dignity. Our whole-child approach ensures middle schoolers have the tools and support they need to become advocates for themselves and others.

Physical Activity

At Pardes, students in the Kaufman Valdes Middle School continue to enjoy the benefits of recess along with many other opportunities that allow for movement throughout the school day. Additionally, they have P.E. classes and may choose to participate in our no-cut athletics. This physical activity all contributes to each student's academic performance and overall wellness.

FACT

Middle school is one of the most effective times to develop leadership skills.



Myth

Leadership opportunities should be deferred to older teens or young adults who are more responsible.

In many traditional school settings, middle school students feel “stuck” in a transitional stage of life, where they’ve already developed foundational skills but don’t have many opportunities to put them into practice. However, the 21st century calls for strong leadership. Critical thinking, decision making, problem solving, planning, and effective communication are skills best developed prior to adulthood. Those who get to lead in middle school begin to see leadership as a part of their identity, and have a sense of purpose to impact the world.



HOW WE HELP:



Nurture Role Models

At Pardes, middle schoolers are natural leaders and role models in our community. They make important investments in our school and model leadership for our younger students through the Buddy Program — an opportunity which allows middle schoolers to mentor and encourage lower school students.

Executive Functioning Training & Practice

Our Advisory Program provides mentorship as well as executive functioning training as students prepare for their futures. Each student meets with his or her trusted staff advisor and a group of peers every morning, fostering a strong sense of connection. Advisors help students with managing their time, staying focused, and prioritizing long-term goals.

Leadership Role Options

Student Council, P-Tech, Student Ambassadors, and Chief Science Officer are a handful of leadership roles that our middle school students enjoy. There are also several leadership positions available within our extracurricular activities, such as theater and athletics.



WHY DO FAMILIES CHOOSE PARDES?



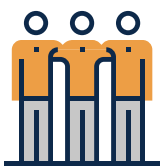
Future Ready Student

Our innovative curriculum provides layered learning opportunities which allow students to master foundational literacies while making real-world connections and moving from knowledge consumers to creators. Project Based Learning, which is implemented at every grade level, sparks passion and promotes high engagement across all subject areas. As a result, students develop key competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration.



Strong Jewish Values

We impact and enrich our students' Jewish identities through the teaching of Jewish thought, culture, and ritual. We are committed to igniting our students' curiosity in order to instill lifelong learning and finding meaningful ways to bring Judaism into contemporary life. Students are immersed in Jewish life throughout their Pardes journey, and they leave understanding their important role in the greater Jewish and secular communities.



Leadership Development

Pardes is an environment where students feel safe to try new things, take risks, and explore their interests. We offer a wide variety of opportunities for developing leadership skills — from community service projects to student government. Every opportunity is designed to help students become more self-confident, and to become advocates for themselves and others. As a result, they discover the importance of being a strong community member with unique and valuable contributions.

Ready to make the most of **MIDDLE SCHOOL?**

Visit pardesschool.org/admissions, where you can:

- Take a virtual or in-person tour of our school.
- Schedule a call or Zoom meeting with admissions.
- Connect with Pardes parents who can share their experiences.

You can also contact us at
480-991-9141 with any questions.



NOTICE OF NON-DISCRIMINATORY POLICY AS TO STUDENTS

Pardes admits qualified students of any race, color, national and ethnic origin, or sexual orientation to all the rights, privileges, programs, and activities generally accorded or made available to students at the school. Pardes does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national and ethnic origin, or sexual orientation in administration of its educational policies, admissions policies, scholarship and loan programs, and athletic and other school-administered programs.