

10 Tips and Tricks for Engaging Middle School Students

Middle school students (about 11-14 years of age) enjoy hands-on, interactive activities that connect to their interests and lived experiences. These activities are best when designed so that they can collaborate with one another and have a sense of autonomy.

When working with a class of middle schoolers, consider the following specific tips and tricks for engagement. Mix and match these strategies depending on the subject matter and class dynamics to keep things exciting for your middle school students!



1. HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES

Project-Based Learning: Give students the opportunity to work on projects that tie into the lesson. For example, a science experiment, or creating a presentation on a topic they research.

Collaborative Work: Let them work in small groups on tasks where they can problem-solve, create, or discuss together. This builds engagement and team-work skills.



2. INCORPORATE TECHNOLOGY

Educational Apps or Games: Use apps like Kahoot!, Quizizz, or Nearpod to turn lessons into fun, interactive games. These tools create a sense of competition and excitement, which can capture their attention.

Interactive Whiteboards: If possible, use digital whiteboards or interactive tools that allow students to participate directly.



3. RELATABLE CONTENT

Real-World Connections: Show how the lesson applies to real-life scenarios. For example, when teaching math, use real-world examples like budgeting, shopping, or even sports statistics.

Pop Culture References: Where appropriate, connect the material to trends, movies, TV shows, or games that are popular with middle schoolers.



4. GAMIFICATION

Reward Systems: Incorporate small rewards or incentives, like stickers, or points for accomplishing tasks or showing effort. Students can turn in these earned points for a larger reward (i.e. small toy like a fidget spinner, company swag, etc.).

Competition: Create friendly competitions where they can earn points or bragging rights. This is especially effective with quizzes or challenges.



5. CHOICE & AUTONOMY

Student Choice: Let students choose topics or activities within a lesson, or what type of project to focus on. This sense of autonomy can increase engagement.

Differentiation: Provide multiple ways for students to demonstrate understanding, whether through written reports, presentations, videos, or creative formats like posters or skits.



6. INTERACTIVE DISCUSSIONS

Student-Led Discussions: Give students the opportunity to guide portions of the lesson or share their perspectives. Encouraging them to ask questions or give answers in creative ways (like using “think-pair-share”) can make them more invested. It also gives you a chance to outline and teach what makes a good facilitator or presenter. Be specific.

Debates: For subjects or industries that lend themselves to argumentation (like history, literature, law, public safety, etc.), organizing a structured debate can engage students and teach them important skills.



7. VISUAL AIDS & STORYTELLING

Visual Learning: Use visuals, charts, videos, and infographics to break down complex ideas. Seventh graders often respond well to colorful, visually stimulating content.

Storytelling: Frame lessons around a story or scenario that they can follow along with, allowing them to connect emotionally to the material.



8. PHYSICAL MOVEMENT

Brain Breaks: Short, fun physical activities or games during lessons (like stretching, quick challenges, or “walk and talk” discussions) can help students refocus.

Interactive Stations: Set up different stations for activities where students can move around, interact with materials, and work on tasks.



9. STUDENT VOICE

Survey Interests: At the beginning of the year or as a mid-year check point, survey students about their interests, and try to incorporate these into your lessons. When students feel that their voices matter, they’re more likely to stay engaged.

Exit Tickets: Use quick “exit tickets” at the end of a lesson where students write what they learned or ask questions. This keeps them engaged until the very end.



10. REFOCUSING AND CALLING ATTENTION

Tried and True: Work with your teacher on what methods they already use for their specific class to refocus or call attention. Introducing a new method may lead to confusion or cause additional disruption. Chat with your teacher about what they do and have them either call attention to the class themselves or use the same method they use.