

Dear Family,

Wouldn't it be great if there were a way to protect your middle school student from risky behaviors, such as bullying, aggression, and substance abuse, while improving his or her school success? Fortunately, research shows there is a way to do just that.

This week we begin the Stepping Ahead program. Building on and practicing skills throughout the middle school years helps students become better able to use them. As in the programs taught in previous years, this program focuses on skills that will help your student succeed in school and in life.

These skills include:

- Empathy
- Communication
- Perspective taking
- Respectful disagreement
- Negotiation and compromise
- Emotion management
- Coping with stress
- Goal setting

You play a vital role in helping your student develop strong social skills. During the next few weeks, the focus of the lessons will be empathy and communication. Ask questions about the skills they are learning, such as:

- “What is the best way to handle a grievance?”
- “Why does it help to consider someone else’s perspective when you negotiate and compromise?”

If you have any questions about the program, please do not hesitate to contact me for more information. Thank you for supporting your student in learning the skills that lead to success in school and in life.

Sincerely,

Dear Family,

Middle school is a time when bullying among peers peaks. This week we started a new topic of the Stepping Ahead program: bullying. Your student is learning to recognize bullying, whether it is happening to the student or to someone else. We are also taking a closer look at bullying between friends and in dating relationships, and how labels and stereotypes can lead to these behaviors. We are focusing on what students can do about bullying so they can be safe and happy at school.

Here at school, we are creating a safe learning environment. We would like to work with you to make this happen. There are several warning signs that could indicate that your child is experiencing bullying at school. Please be on the alert for:

- Damaged or missing clothing, books, or other belongings
- Unexpected bruises, cuts, or scratches
- Few or no friends to spend time with
- Fear of going to school
- Fear of riding the bus or walking to school
- Taking an illogical or long route home
- An unexpected drop in grades and/or interest
- Unusual moodiness, depression, anxiety, or crying
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches
- Loss of appetite
- Trouble sleeping

If you suspect your student is being bullied, contact _____ at our school for help. If you suspect your student is participating in bullying, please visit www.cfchildren.org/issues/resource-links to find online resources that can help guide you in talking to your student about bullying.

Ask your student to talk to you about the Bystander Power suggestions, how labels and stereotypes can be harmful, and the early warning signs of dating violence. Tell your student about your experiences with bullying and/or prejudice and stereotyping, either what you remember from your youth or what you have experienced in the workplace. Ask your student about what kinds of bullying he or she sees happening at school.

Together we can help our youth stay safe and develop confidence and empathy during the middle school years.

Sincerely,

Dear Family,

Trouble with friends, coping with homework, responsibilities at home—there are many demands on teens that may cause strong emotions. When strong emotions get out of hand, it can be hard to think straight and make good decisions.

This week we started our Stepping Ahead lessons about managing emotions and coping with stress. The focus of these lessons is on recognizing when you are starting to experience strong emotions and staying in control of these emotions so you can make good choices.

Your student is learning the Steps for Staying in Control of strong emotions.

The Steps for Staying in Control are:

- Notice.** Recognize your physical and mental signs.
- Pause.** Use your signal.
- Think twice.** Use your brain.
- Calm down if necessary.** Use your calming-down strategies.
- Reflect.** How did you do?

Ask your student about the steps. Help your student remember to pause and think twice before doing something he or she might regret.

The strategies for calming down are useful for anyone, adult or teen. They are:

- Doing something physically active**
- Doing something relaxing**
- Thinking about something else (like counting to ten)**
- Using centered breathing**
- Using positive self-talk**

Ask your student to show you how these work!

Staying in control helps students get along with others, cope with stressful situations, and focus on their schoolwork. These things help them be more successful in school. Thank you for your support in creating a successful learning environment for your student.

Sincerely,

Dear Family,

Abraham Lincoln once said, “A goal properly set is halfway reached.” This week your student will begin the goal-setting section of the Stepping Ahead program. Over the next couple of weeks, students will learn an effective model for planning, executing, and evaluating goals.

We will learn how to use the Action Steps for setting goals. They are:

A: Analyze the goal.

B: Brainstorm options for ways to reach the goal.

C: Consider each option.

D: Decide on and Do the best option.

E: Evaluate if it works. *If necessary:*

F: Figure out another way.

Your student will be working on a group goal project with other members of his or her class. Ask to see the handout that describes the details of the plan to reach the goal.

Cycling through the goal-setting process helps students see how success comes with personal effort rather than luck or natural talent alone. This can build confidence, optimism, and hope for the future. Increased goal-setting skills and confidence support student success in and out of school.

Try using the Action Steps to set family goals. Small successes lead to bigger successes down the road!

Sincerely,

Dear Family,

Middle school is often a time when students first hear about using alcohol and other drugs, see it happening, or begin to experiment themselves. To keep your student safe and on track at school, we have started the final topic in the Stepping Ahead program: substance abuse prevention. When young people use alcohol or other drugs, it gets in the way of school success, and it is linked to increased involvement in violence and other risky behaviors.

New brain studies show that during their teenage years and into their twenties, young people's brains are still developing. These studies show that using alcohol or other drugs at this time has a far more damaging effect than it does on an adult's brain.

The good news is that studies also show that families can play a big role in preventing the use of alcohol and other drugs by young people.

Here are five things you can do to make a difference:

1. Give your student a clear message that it is not okay to drink or use other drugs. Discuss personal, family, social, or religious values that give your student reasons to not use.
2. Arrange for supervision for your student between 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. Research suggests that these are peak hours for teen drug and alcohol use.
3. Get to know your student's friends and their families. You can help each other keep your students safe.
4. Help your student make a plan for how he or she might avoid or resist both internal and external pressure to use.
5. Make sure an adult is supervising any party your student attends.

Please be aware that students often get alcohol and other drugs, especially inhalants, from their own homes. See our Web site at www.cfchildren.org/issues/resource-links for links to information about what household items are most toxic.

Your student will be bringing home fact sheets about the personal, health, and social consequences of using alcohol and other drugs. Please read through these facts with your student. Together we can help keep your student safe and healthy.

Sincerely,