

Getting Started

Middle school motivators are interactive learning structures—easy-to-use activities like Swap Meet (p. 18) that has students pairing up with various classmates to exchange ideas for solving a problem or Venn-ting (p. 20) in which students analyze similarities and differences by creating a Venn diagram with partners or in small groups. By giving students opportunities to move around a bit, positively interact with peers, and stretch their thinking, these interactive learning structures motivate students to engage more deeply with their learning.

What’s more, these structures enable you to provide varied opportunities for lively learning while maintaining order and purposefulness in your classroom. Each structure helps you quickly organize students into pairs or small groups and provides a format that helps students work together on a specific learning goal, assignment, or project. And these structures promote positive behavior by meeting young adolescents’ developmental need for learning that’s both active (hands-on, experiential) and interactive (social, collaborative).

Going Beyond Mere Fun and Games

Interactive learning structures are fun, but they’re much more than that. They are also ignitors of learning. By piquing students’ interest in the material, these structures encourage maximum effort and strengthen students’ academic and social-emotional skills. By letting students interact in positive ways with classmates, these structures help build a positive classroom community. And by giving you quick and easy ways to organize students’ learning, they help you make the most of your most valuable and limited resource—time. The result: improved motivation and learning outcomes for every student you teach. (See facing page for a list of benefits.)

Using Interactive Learning Structures Effectively

The following tips will help you get the most out of the 22 structures in this book:

Take time to plan and reflect

To help students be successful, it’s important to give yourself time to plan how you’ll use each structure. Think about the learning goal, whether your classroom allows enough space for the structure you have in mind, and if students are developmentally ready to do it—for example, can they exercise self-control when everyone’s moving around the room at the same time? Then after students have used the structure, take some time to reflect on what went well and what didn’t, and adjust as needed next time.

Benefits of Using Interactive Learning Structures

Building Students' Skills

Because interactive learning structures make learning lively and engaging, they help students build:

Academic Learning Skills

- * **Academic Mindset:** Belief that abilities are not fixed, but grow with effort.
- * **Academic Perseverance:** Willingness to keep working hard, even when facing challenges.
- * **Academic Behaviors:** Actions that demonstrate taking responsibility for one's learning (such as coming to class ready to listen, work, and participate).
- * **Learning Strategies:** Study skills and higher-level thinking skills that students consciously use to understand content and achieve learning goals.

Social-Emotional Learning Skills

- * **Cooperation:** Working productively and collaboratively with others.
- * **Assertiveness:** Taking individual initiative and developing positive self-identity.
- * **Responsibility:** Motivating oneself to work hard and choose positive courses of action.
- * **Empathy:** Understanding and appreciating another person's ideas, beliefs, and feelings.
- * **Self-Control:** Recognizing and regulating one's own thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

Boosting Teacher Effectiveness

By using these structures, you'll find that you're better able to:

- * Pique students' interest in the content.
- * Motivate students to maximize effort.
- * Help students develop leadership and teamwork skills.
- * Reduce off-task behaviors.
- * Provide safe, productive peer-to-peer interactions.
- * Build a positive classroom community.
- * Make the most of limited classroom time.

Make sure students have the skills they need

You'll want to make sure that any structure you choose is relatively easy for all students to use successfully so it supports rather than interferes with learning goals. For example, *Maître d'* (page 40) requires students to move around the classroom to form small groups with different classmates and share a wide range of ideas, so you'd want to be sure they can do both of those things successfully. One quick, effective way to teach skills like these is by using a *Responsive Classroom* practice called Interactive Modeling. Here's how you might use this four-step practice to teach students safe movement:

- 1 Describe and explain what you'll model.** Your brief statement helps students focus: "We're going to share ideas by doing a cool learning activity called *Maître d'*. We'll move around the classroom a lot, so I'll first demonstrate what safe movement looks like."
- 2 Model while students notice.** Don't narrate as you demonstrate the skill or routine; instead, let students concentrate on observing the key aspects themselves. Afterward, ask them what they noticed.
- 3 Give students the opportunity to collaborate and practice.** Immediate practice helps students get the steps down while your demonstration is fresh in their minds.
- 4 Reinforce their practice with immediate feedback.** Name students' specific, positive actions and respectfully correct mistakes to solidify their understanding: "You all took care in moving throughout the room quietly and safely when forming groups."



Use pairs as the starting point

Working with just one person can feel safer for students as they develop their academic conversation skills, so have students start working in pairs rather than small groups or as a whole class. Use the "At a Glance" charts on pages 8–11 to find structures that will help students work effectively in pairs.

Form pairs and groups purposefully

Most of the structures in this book call for putting students in pairs or small groups of three or four. Think about the learning goal, as well as students' abilities and interests, when assigning them to pairs or groups. Some ways to form groups are mixed abilities, mixed interests, similar abilities, similar interests, or randomly. When you think students are ready to be respectful and inclusive, give them some autonomy in choosing their own partners or groupmates.



Speak briefly, directly, and genuinely

Because a teacher’s language—words, tone, and pace—is one of the most powerful teaching tools available, how you speak to the class while using these structures helps ensure their success. Effective teacher language helps students learn by conveying faith in their abilities and intentions, and by focusing on their actions rather than their character or personality. Throughout this book, you’ll see examples of teacher language that supports students’ learning, including:

- * Open-ended questions—to draw on middle schoolers’ thoughts, knowledge, skills, experiences, and feelings and to acknowledge their eagerness to share their ideas: “What do you already know about how the liver works and why it’s essential to good health?”
- * Reinforcing language—to identify and affirm students’ positive actions and accomplishments, which helps them continue to learn and grow: “You made sure each person had an equal chance to talk.” “You backed up your ideas with evidence.”
- * Reminding language—to prompt students to remember for themselves the expectations you’ve taught: “What’s one thing you can do if your group gets stuck on a challenge?”

State the expectations for small group learning

It’s important to emphasize that you expect everyone to make a contribution and that both individual and group effort determine success. Regularly remind students of these expectations whenever they’re about to begin working with partners or in small groups.

Clarify roles and responsibilities

To ensure true collaboration, teach students how to carry out their individual roles and responsibilities as members of a group or team. Often you’ll want to assign specific roles within each group, such as:

- * Facilitator—keeps the group focused on their collaborative task and makes sure all voices are heard
- * Recorder (note taker)—takes notes for the group
- * Reporter—collects ideas from other groups and reports them back to their own group
- * Presenter—shares out the group’s ideas

Be specific when teaching each of these roles: name exactly what to do and model as needed. Post anchor charts that list roles and responsibilities to support students in being successful.