**Get Classically Educated**

DEVELOPING THINKERS, NOT TEST TAKERS

FREE DOWNLOAD · AGES 12–13

DIALECTIC STAGE

# 10 ways the middle years shape how your child thinks, and how to tell if this approach suits them

*A free guide for parents of 12- and 13-year-olds from Get Classically Educated*

| Grammar | Dialectic | Rhetoric |
|---|---|---|
| Ages 8–11 | Ages 12–13 THIS GUIDE | Ages 14–18 |

## Hi friend,

Somewhere around 12, something shifts. The child who used to soak up every fact starts asking "But why?" and "Says who?" Some days it feels like everything turns into a debate. If you've ever walked away from a conversation with your preteen thinking, *How did I just lose that argument?*, you're in very good company.

Get Classically Educated was started by two Florida homeschool families, and here's what we've come to believe about this season: it isn't a problem to manage. It's a door. Classical education calls these the Dialectic years, the stage when kids learn to reason, question and argue well.

Here are 10 ways the middle years shape how your child thinks. Each one comes with a real fact you can check for yourself and something simple to try at home.

THE 10 THINGS AT A GLANCE


1. Why your 12-year-old suddenly argues about everything (and why that's good)
2. Most people get this famous puzzle wrong alone. Groups get it right.
3. Most middle schoolers can't spot an ad dressed up as news. Logic helps.
4. Socrates' favorite question: "What do you mean by that?"
5. Only about 1 in 4 eighth graders write at a proficient level
6. Kids remember more when they expect to teach it
7. Only 1 in 7 thirteen-year-olds read for fun almost every day. Good books and good talk can change that.
8. Self-control isn't fixed, and kids who build it do better as adults
9. The teen brain is still under construction, and what they practice now shapes it
10. Around 12, kids start thinking "what if?" Here's how to use it


THE 10 THINGS

## 1 Why your 12-year-old suddenly argues about everything (and why that's good)

**1947** the year Dorothy Sayers gave "The Lost Tools of Learning" at Oxford

In her famous 1947 essay, **Dorothy Sayers noticed that kids around this age love to contradict, answer back and catch grown-ups in a mistake.** Instead of stamping that out, she said to teach them to do it well.

That's freeing to hear on a hard day. The pushback isn't a sign something's wrong. It's a sign their reasoning is waking up. The Dialectic years give all that energy a target: logic.

**TRY THIS AT HOME:**

The next time your child pushes back, say, "Okay, convince me. Give me two good reasons." Then really listen. You may be surprised.

## 2 Most people get this famous puzzle wrong alone. Groups get it right.

**9% vs 75%** **solved the logic puzzle alone vs. in groups that talked it through**

Try it yourself. Four cards sit on a table: **E, K, 4, 7.** Each card has a letter on one side and a number on the other. The rule is: *If a card has a vowel on one side, it has an even number on the other.* Which cards do you have to flip over to check whether the rule is true? (The answer is at the end of this section. No peeking!)

This puzzle has been stumping people since the 1960s. In a 1998 study, college students tried it. **Working alone, only about 9% got it right. In small groups that talked it through, about 75% did.**

That's why discussion matters so much at this age. Someone spots the hole in your thinking, you defend your idea or let it go, and together you get closer to the truth. Arguing well isn't about winning. It's how people figure things out, and 12- and 13-year-olds are ready to learn it.

**TRY THIS AT HOME:**

Give your family this puzzle at dinner. Let everyone try alone for one minute, then solve it together. Afterward, talk about what changed once you started talking.

*Answer: E and 7. The E has to have an even number on the back. The 7 must not have a vowel on the back. The K and the 4 can't break the rule, so they don't matter. (If you picked the 4, you're in very good company.)*

## 3 Most middle schoolers can't spot an ad dressed up as news. Logic helps.

**8 in 10** middle schoolers thought an ad labeled "sponsored content" was a real news story

**In a 2016 Stanford study, more than 8 in 10 middle schoolers thought an ad labeled "sponsored content" was a real news story.**

Logic teaches kids to slow down and ask: Who made this? What do they want me to believe? Does the reasoning hold up? In a world of ads, influencers and AI, those questions are a kind of protection.

> TRY THIS AT HOME:
>
> The next time you're scrolling together, play "Ad or not?" Ask your child who paid for the post and how they can tell.

## 4 Socrates' favorite question: "What do you mean by that?"

**In Plato's dialogues, Socrates often starts with a simple question like "What is courage?" or "What is justice?"** Then he shows how quickly smart people get tangled up trying to answer it.

Definition is the first of the Five Common Topics for a reason. Before you can argue about whether something is "fair," you have to agree on what "fair" means. Twelve-year-olds love catching people who haven't thought that through.

**Socrates never wrote a book. He taught by talking.** Almost everything we know about his teaching comes from his students, mostly Plato. More than 2,400 years later, discussion is still one of the best ways to sharpen a mind.

> TRY THIS AT HOME:
>
> The next time someone says "That's not fair!", ask, "What does *fair* mean?" Let them try to define it. It's harder than it sounds, and it's a great conversation.
>
> **Bonus:** Read a short article or watch a short video together. Then each of you shares one thing you agree with and one thing you'd question.

## 5 Only about 1 in 4 eighth graders write at a proficient level

**27%** of 8th graders scored proficient or above on the most recent national writing test (2011)

**On the most recent national writing test, given in 2011, about 27% of 8th graders scored proficient or above.** If teaching writing feels hard, you're not imagining it.

Dialectic writing gives kids a clear shape to follow: make a claim, give your reasons, answer the other side. And kids who spent the week discussing an idea actually have something to say when they sit down to write.

> **TRY THIS AT HOME:**
>
> At dinner, ask a big question like "Is it ever okay to break a rule?" Have your child give one claim and two reasons out loud. Then have them write those three sentences down. That's the start of an essay.

## 6 Kids remember more when they expect to teach it

In a 2014 study, **people who were told they'd have to teach a passage to someone else remembered more of it, and more of the main points, than people who expected a test.** The funny part? Nobody actually had to teach. Just expecting to explain it changed how they learned.

That's why the Dialectic years lean on explaining. When your child knows they'll have to put an idea into their own words for someone else, they read differently.

> **TRY THIS AT HOME:**
>
> Once a week, let your child teach *you* something from their week. Play the curious student and ask lots of questions.

## 7 Only 1 in 7 thirteen-year-olds read for fun almost every day. Good books and good talk can change that.

**14%** of 13-year-olds read for fun almost every day in 2023, down from 27% in 2012

**On the 2023 national long-term trend test, only 14% of 13-year-olds said they read for fun almost every day. In 2012 it was 27%.** That drop shows up right in the middle years.

Classical education doesn't treat reading as a box to check. In the Dialectic years, students read real books and then talk about them with people who want to hear what they think.

TRY THIS AT HOME:

Pick a book you can both read this month. Each week, trade one question about it at dinner. Let your child ask you one too.

## 8 Self-control isn't fixed, and kids who build it do better as adults

**1,037** children followed from birth to age 32

A long-running study followed 1,037 children in New Zealand from birth to age 32. **Childhood self-control predicted adult health and finances. And the children whose self-control improved over time did better than their early scores predicted.**

That second part is the hopeful one. Self-control is a skill, and the middle years are a great time to practice it. In the Dialectic stage, kids start owning a weekly plan, managing their time and finishing what they start, with less hand-holding each month.

TRY THIS AT HOME:

Hand over one piece of the week. Let your child decide when they'll finish their reading, then check in together on Friday. Praise the planning, not just the result.

## 9 The teen brain is still under construction, and what they practice now shapes it

**Mid-to-late 20s** when the brain finishes developing

The National Institute of Mental Health says **the brain keeps developing into the mid-to-late 20s, and the part that handles planning and decision-making is one of the last to mature.** It also says the teen brain has an amazing ability to adapt, and that challenging classes and creative activities can strengthen it.

This one can bring a lot of grace to the hard days. When a 13-year-old makes a decision that leaves you scratching your head, remember that their brain is still being built. The habits of careful thinking they practice now are part of the building.

> TRY THIS AT HOME:
>
> When a choice goes sideways, skip the lecture and talk it through calmly: "What were you thinking? What would you do next time?" That's reasoning practice too.

## 10 Around 12, kids start thinking "what if?" Here's how to use it

**11 or 12** the age when "what if" thinking starts

**Psychologist Jean Piaget found that around age 11 or 12, kids begin to reason about abstract ideas and "what if" situations, not just what's right in front of them.**

That's exactly why the middle years are the time for big questions. Was that character right? What if this battle had gone the other way? Classical education takes this new kind of thinking and gives it great books and real history to work on.

> TRY THIS AT HOME:
>
> Ask one "what if" question at dinner this week: "What if you could only keep three things you own?" or "What if nobody had invented the printing press?" Let everyone take a turn.

## Does this approach suit your preteen? Signs to look for

This isn't a test. Most kids show some of these, and the rest grow with practice.

- They argue a lot, and they're getting better at it.
- They'd rather talk about a book than fill in a worksheet about it.
- They ask "How do you know?" or "Says who?"
- They like puzzles, mysteries, riddles or strategy games.
- They want more say in how and when they do their work.
- They notice when something doesn't add up, in a movie plot, an ad or a rule.

## When it might not be the right fit (yet)

We'd rather tell you now than have you find out six weeks in. GCE may not be the best fit for your family right now if:

- **You want a program that does all the teaching for you.** With GCE, you stay in charge of your homeschool and you're involved every week. We plan it; you lead it.
- **You'd rather skip discussion and debate.** The Dialectic years are built around them.
- **You want grades, report cards or transcripts handed to you.** You're the educator of record. GCE doesn't issue grades, and you keep your own records.
- **You need a math curriculum.** Math isn't included, so you'll choose your own.
- **You'd rather have mostly video lessons.** GCE is planned online but learned with real books, paper and conversation.

And if your child doesn't check every box above? That's okay. That's exactly what the free sample week and the 15-minute call are for.

## See a real GCE week, free

This is the age when it really helps to have someone else ask the hard questions. With GCE, you get a pre-planned weekly Agenda for the whole year, and you stay in charge of your homeschool. For the Dialectic years, you can add optional live classes: a GCE mentor leads discussion on Zoom one day a week for four hours, with no more than 12 students.

Here are three free, no-pressure ways to see if it fits your family:

**1. Look at a real week.** Browse actual sample weeks, hour by hour:

**See a GCE Week**

**2. Try a live class.** Fill out a short form, and a real person from GCE will set your child up in a class:

**Try a week for free**

**3. Talk it through.** A free 15-minute call about your child and your family:

**Book a discovery call**

Have a question? Just reply to the email this guide came in. A real person reads every one, and we'd love to hear from you.

Warmly,
The Get Classically Educated Team

**SOURCES**


- **#1 Dorothy Sayers:** "The Lost Tools of Learning" (1947)
- **#2 Reasoning alone vs. together:** Moshman & Geil, "Collaborative Reasoning" (1998), University of Nebraska
- **#3 Ads vs. real news:** Stanford History Education Group (2016), via TechCrunch
- **#4 Socrates:** Plato's dialogues *Laches* (courage) and *Republic* (justice)
- **#5 Writing proficiency:** 2011 NAEP writing results, via Education Week

- **#6 Expecting to teach:** Nestojko et al., *Memory & Cognition* (2014), via Washington University
- **#7 Reading for fun:** NAEP Long-Term Trend 2023, via National Endowment for the Arts, "Federal Data on Reading for Pleasure: All Signs Show a Slump" (2024)
- **#8 Self-control:** Moffitt et al., *PNAS* (2011), Dunedin Study fact sheet
- **#9 The teen brain:** National Institute of Mental Health, "The Teen Brain: 7 Things to Know"
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FOR THE FRIDGE

# All 10 “Try this at home” tips

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1. **CONVINCE ME**
   The next time your child pushes back, say, "Okay, convince me. Give me two good reasons." Then really listen. You may be surprised.

2. **PUZZLE NIGHT**
   Give your family this puzzle at dinner. Let everyone try alone for one minute, then solve it together. Afterward, talk about what changed once you started talking.

3. **AD OR NOT?**
   The next time you're scrolling together, play "Ad or not?" Ask your child who paid for the post and how they can tell.

4. **DEFINE IT**
   The next time someone says "That's not fair!", ask, "What does *fair* mean?" Let them try to define it. It's harder than it sounds, and it's a great conversation.

5. **CLAIM AND REASONS**
   At dinner, ask a big question like "Is it ever okay to break a rule?" Have your child give one claim and two reasons out loud. Then have them write those three sentences down. That's the start of an essay.

6. **TEACH ME**
   Once a week, let your child teach *you* something from their week. Play the curious student and ask lots of questions.

7. **READ AND TALK**
   Pick a book you can both read this month. Each week, trade one question about it at dinner. Let your child ask you one too.

8. **PLAN THE WEEK**
   Hand over one piece of the week. Let your child decide when they'll finish their reading, then check in together on Friday. Praise the planning, not just the result.

9. **TALK IT THROUGH**
   When a choice goes sideways, skip the lecture and talk it through calmly: "What were you thinking? What would you do next time?" That's reasoning practice too.

10. **WHAT IF?**
    Ask one "what if" question at dinner this week: "What if you could only keep three things you own?" or "What if nobody had invented the printing press?" Let everyone take a turn.