

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



MIDDLE SCHOOL

December 2024

Four simple ways to help your middle schooler feel motivated

Everyone needs a motivation recharge from time to time. When middle schoolers fall into a “Why work hard?” trap, these strategies can help.

To inspire your child to put effort into learning:

- 1. Discuss real-life connections.** Some students lose interest in schoolwork because they can't see why it matters. Look for links your child can understand. Does your middle schooler love airplanes? Can your child imagine designing them one day? Remind your student that solid math skills are essential in that field.
- 2. Recognize effort.** Notice when your child works hard on an assignment. Say that it makes you proud. Middle schoolers may act like they don't want adults' approval, but they really do.
- 3. Celebrate achievement.** Did your child study well and earn a B-plus on that tough history test? Let your child invite a friend for a make-your-own sundae party. Celebrating the positive results of effort could be just the motivation your student needs to keep striving.
- 4. Suggest a personal challenge.** What does your child think about choosing some advanced or honors classes next year? Express confidence in your child's ability to rise to the challenge. The idea just might motivate your middle schooler to increase effort this year in order to be ready.



Share math & science study strategies

The things your child is learning now in math and science will be the basis for the material that follows later on. Practicing effective study skills will help your middle schooler master current material and be ready for the future.

For success with math and science, teach your middle schooler to:

- **Block out time to study** these subjects every day, especially if the topics are challenging.
- **Review class notes** before beginning a new assignment.
- **Draw pictures.** Encourage your child to draw diagrams of concepts and processes.
- **Read and try to answer** any sample questions in assigned reading. If your child can't do this, it's time to reread the text.
- **Answer extra questions.** The teacher may assign specific numbered questions in the text, but tackling the rest (no need to turn them in) will give your child more practice and increase familiarity with how to answer or solve them.

Make plans for attendance

Before the new calendar year begins, review your child's attendance so far. Did your child attend every class every day, except in case of illness or emergency? Celebrate together and keep up the good work.

If attendance was lacking, show your child that regular on-time attendance is a family priority. Adjust routines and schedules at home as necessary. Then, establish consequences for missing classes.

'I messages' reduce power struggles

Anything you say that begins “You always” or “you never” or even just “you” may sound like an accusation to your child. Your student may fight back in defense rather than listen. Instead, talk about *your* feelings. Saying “I get frustrated when clothes are on the floor,” is less likely to provoke an argument than, “You never put your things away!”



Read for fun as a family

Frequent pleasure reading boosts not only reading ability, but also math, science and history outcomes. Make pleasure reading a family activity. To encourage your child:

- **Visit the library together.** See what books appeal to your child.
- **Plan** family reading times. Serve hot chocolate and get cozy together.
- **Discuss books.** Tell your child about a book you liked. Or, ask your child to tell you about a favorite book.
- **Allow book switching.** Don't force your child to finish a book that's boring. Help find one that's more enjoyable.



Source: C. Whitten and others, “The Impact of Pleasure Reading on Academic Success,” *The Journal of Multidisciplinary Graduate Research*.



My child is struggling to fit in. How can I help?

Q: My seventh grader doesn't fit in with any of the groups of kids who hang around together at school. When my child tries to approach "popular" kids, the response is often put-downs or teasing. Telling my child to try to make different friends hasn't helped at all. What can I do?



A: It's natural for your child to want to be included in a clique—a group of students who band together and exclude others. Cliques provide a sense of belonging. To some kids, being accepted by them means you're OK.

To ease your child's feelings of rejection:

- **Make it clear you are there** for your child, no matter what.
- **Make a list of your child's assets.** Explain that these positive attributes aren't affected whether your middle schooler is in a group or not.
- **Explain that cliques usually dissolve** when kids are mature enough to stand on their own. Not being one of a group can give your child a head start over them in maturity. At the same time, discourage pursuit of groups whose members are popular because they do things that are too advanced for their age.
- **Encourage hobbies** and interests to help fill the void. Look for related activities where your child can meet like-minded people.

If the teasing gets out of hand, your child should tell a school counselor.



Are you supporting safety after school?

Children are most likely to get into trouble in the afternoon hours right after school. Are you taking action to make your child's afternoons safe if you can't be there to supervise? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

1. **Do you arrange** for your child to participate in extracurricular activities at school?
2. **Do you check in** by phone when your child is at home and you aren't?
3. **Do you make sure** your child has an adult contact nearby, such as a relative or neighbor?
4. **Do you set clear rules** about things that are and are not allowed when you are not home, including who may be let into your house?

5. **Do you discuss** dangerous situations with your child and ways to avoid them?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are taking steps to ensure safety after school. For each no, try that idea.

"For children to become successful learners, their basic needs for safety and belonging must first be met."

—Kathy Perez

Clear rules close loopholes

Rules are most effective when your child understands exactly what you expect. When setting rules and expectations:

- **State what you want** your child to do. Avoid unneeded questions like, "How many times have I told you not to ...?"
- **Be specific.** Avoid extra words that may unintentionally provoke misbehavior. "Finish your chores today," is better than "Try to finish your chores today."
- **Be direct,** not threatening. "Our rule is homework before dinner." Saying "If your work isn't done by dinner, you can't have dessert," allows the choice to skip dessert.

Restating reinforces recall

Remembering the material they are learning is a challenge for many students.

One key factor in boosting retention is understanding. It's tough to remember something correctly if you don't understand it.

To help, ask your child to explain the material to you. Putting concepts into their own words helps students figure out what they know, and what they need to review or ask questions about. And it reinforces their memories of the information.



Is your child well-rested?

Does your child fall asleep within 30 minutes of going to bed? Wake up fairly easily in the morning? Stay alert in school? If not, your child may not be sleeping enough, like 60 percent of middle schoolers. Take steps to:

- **Enforce** a regular bedtime.
- **Limit** afternoon naps to 15-20 minutes.
- **Set** a digital curfew and charge devices away from the bedroom at night.

Source: "Sleep and Health," CDC Healthy Schools.

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