

Helping Students Learn®

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

MIDDLE SCHOOL



February 2025

Empower your middle schooler to take a stand against bullying

In a recent survey, more than half of middle school educators named bullying as the top safety issue in school. Talking with your child about bullying is an important way to help stop it.

Explain that bullying isn't just physical. It also includes:

- **Verbal abuse**, such as name-calling and spreading rumors about people.
- **Social manipulation**, such as getting others to exclude someone.
- **Cyberbullying**, such as posting cruel or embarrassing photos and comments on social media.



Emphasize that it is important to take a stand against all forms of bullying. Discuss possible actions your child can take, like saying, "That's not OK," walking away with the person being bullied and telling an adult at school.

If your child is being bullied:

- **Discuss it gently.** Your student may be scared or embarrassed. Make it clear that what is happening is not your child's fault.
- **Assure your middle schooler** that you will help resolve the problem.
- **Work with the school.** A school counselor may have solutions you aren't aware of and suggestions for helping your child.

Source: L. Baker and A. Prothero, "The State of Bullying in Schools, in Charts," EducationWeek.



Students can learn a lot from tests

Tests assess what students have learned. But does your middle schooler know that tests are also things to learn from? Reviewing a graded test is one of the most effective ways to improve scores on future tests.

When the teacher returns a test, encourage your child to:

- **Make a note** of which concepts were challenging and which were most familiar.
- **Correct wrong answers.** Your child should figure out what the mistake was ("I added instead of multiplying") or why the answers were wrong. If this is a struggle, suggest asking the teacher.
- **Analyze error types.** Mistakes are most often due to carelessness, confusion or lack of preparation.
- **Plan for the next test.** To reduce careless errors, your child could read questions twice and double-check work. If a topic is confusing, your child should ask for help. Studying material for several days is a better way to prepare than cramming in one night.

Humor boosts connection

A new study links parents' use of humor in raising their children to a stronger lasting relationship between the kids and the parents. Laughing together is also an effective way to relieve stress and increase wellbeing. To encourage it, share funny stories, jokes and shows as a family. Just make sure that the joke is never at your child's expense.

Source: L. Emery and others, "Humor in parenting: Does it have a role?" PLOS ONE.

Provide a listening ear

When middle schoolers feel their families don't listen to them, they often stop talking. To be an attentive listener:

- **Listen right away.** Don't ask your child to wait unless it is really necessary.
- **Hear your child** out before speaking. If you interrupt or hijack the conversation, you may never hear what your child was going to say.



Keep the learning going

Show your child that learning matters by reinforcing and encouraging it at home. Make it a point to:

- **Ask your child to teach you.** Find out what your child is learning and ask for an explanation.
- **Apply school** subjects in daily life. Show your child how vital it is to understand fractions when doubling a recipe, for example.
- **Offer new experiences.** Challenge your child to connect them to something learned in school.
- **Have your child use** school skills to help you. Can your child research how to clear a sink drain safely?



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Should I volunteer and risk embarrassing my child?

Q: I planned to help chaperone an upcoming middle school field trip, but my child is begging me not to. Which matters more, engaging with school or not embarrassing my child?

A: Students and schools benefit from the help of family volunteers. However, you don't want your engagement efforts to make your child miserable. To find a balance:



- **Take your child seriously.** Don't ignore complaints. Instead, sit down and talk about it. "I realize you don't want me chaperoning the field trip. I'd like to know why. Is there something specific you are worried about?"
- **Ask questions.** When you listen to your child, keep in mind that there is huge social pressure to fit in during middle school. Ask questions like, "Are you afraid your friends will think you are lame if they see me on the field trip?" If your child says *yes*, ask, "Would you think it was weird if your friends' parents volunteered? Or would it be no big deal?"
- **Look for ways to be involved** while respecting your child's feelings. If your child is still unhappy about having you on a field trip, sign up for something else instead. Perhaps you could serve on a school committee or support the front office staff. And if you happen to see your child when you are at school, don't make a big deal of it. Just smile and walk away.



Are you and your child communicating?

Open communication between you and your middle schooler is essential for you to know what's going on and provide support or take action. Are you maintaining a communication connection with your child? Find out below:

1. **Do you know** who your child eats lunch with often? Write one name: _____
2. **Do you know** your child's teachers' names and what they teach? Who is your child's favorite? _____
3. **Do you know** what worries your child? Name one of your child's current concerns: _____
4. **Do you know** who your child texts regularly? Name two friends: _____

5. **Do you know** your child's music likes and listen together sometimes? Name a favorite song or group: _____

How well are you doing?

Discuss your answers with your answers with your child. Can your child answer similar questions about you?

"Communication works for those who work at it."

—John Powell

Apply strengths to struggles

Students try harder when they think they can succeed. So, if one class is a struggle, help your child figure out what's working in another class and how to apply it. To help your child build on strengths:

1. **Ask**, "What class do you think you are doing the best in?"
2. **Discuss** things your child is doing in that class that have led to success.
3. **Add** your own ideas about your child's strengths to the list.
4. **Form** a plan. You might say, "You ask questions in history if you don't quite get something. Could you do that in science?"
5. **Follow up.** Ask for regular updates on the strengths your child is using and the results. Discuss other strategies to try.

Share tips for group study

Studying with others is an effective way for students to extend the learning they do alone. Group study builds interactive skills, and can help your child feel supported while learning.

Remind your child that effective study groups keep the focus on learning, not socializing. Suggest taking turns leading so one person doesn't dominate the group.



Neglect isn't just a mistake

Doing the even math problems instead of the odd ones might be an honest mistake. But if your child didn't do the assignment at all:

- **Explain that this is neglect**, and neglecting responsibilities is never OK.
- **Reinforce that school** is your child's number one responsibility.
- **Enforce a consequence** that relates to the neglected task.

Source: K. Thomsen, M.S., *Parenting Preteens with a Purpose*, Search Institute Press.

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