

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



MIDDLE SCHOOL

November 2024

Five ways to support this stage in your child's academic journey

Now that you have a middle schooler, you may not be as directly involved daily schoolwork as you were in earlier grades. But your child still needs your guidance, encouragement and inspiration to become a strong student.

To support your child's success in school:

1. Be a learning resource.

Expect your child to complete assignments independently. But be available to cheer your student on, answer questions and suggest places to find additional information, such as a website or reference work.

2. Help your child strengthen study skills,

 such as time management, organization and test preparation.

3. Focus attention on learning.

 Grades matter, but they are really a product of learning. Emphasize the learning process with your child, which includes effort, persistence and progress before reaching goals.

4. Encourage discovery.

 If your child comes to you with a question you can't answer, it's OK to say "I don't know." Then add, "Let's look for an answer online or in your book!"

5. Expect varying results.

 Every child has strengths and weaknesses. Support and encourage your child in every class, but do not expect the same performance in each subject.

Ask your child to estimate

You may think of math as requiring precise answers. But the first step to arriving at them is often estimation. Offer your child "real life" estimation challenges, such as:

- **How many** pounds of turkey will we need to feed 11 people if each person eats six ounces?
- **How long do you think** it will take you to finish all your assignments?
- **How many yards** of leaves will you have to blow to earn \$10,000 if you get \$24 each time you clear a yard?



Then, encourage your child to check the estimate by working the problem through.

Require respectful language

Adolescents often adopt the rude and mocking language they hear. To curb back talk:

- **Say, "It's OK"** to have a different opinion, but you must express it politely."
- **Restate your child's point** in a respectful tone.
- **Establish consequences** for repeated rudeness. Then, follow through.

Address a poor report card

Poor grades are cause for concern rather than anger. They indicate a problem. Talk with your child about what that might be. It may not be academic ability, for example, but poor study habits or test anxiety. To help your student move forward:

- **Point out strengths** and successes as well as issues.
- **Consult the teachers** for their views on the problem and how to help.
- **Set realistic goals** for improvement by the next grading period.



Nothing is private on social media

In a recent survey, 68 percent of pre-teens reported using social media apps—even those meant for people over 13. The potential downsides of social media use make it essential for you to be aware of what your child sees and posts. Talk together about safety and privacy. During your talk:

- **Discuss boundaries.** Has your child seen posts that share too much? Address those specifics, and ask your child to always tell you about posts that seem out of line. Stress that your child should not post anything that could damage a reputation or friendship.
- **Explain that online viewers** may not care about your child. They may use or share posts without your child's permission. Make it clear that nothing online can ever be completely deleted.
- **Emphasize safety.** Posts should never allow someone to find your child in real life. Your child should not agree to meet online "friends" without you.

Source: "Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use," Common Sense.

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Is a very hectic schedule too much stress for my child?

Q: My child is constantly on the go. Schoolwork, friends and sports all compete for limited time. My child does well and doesn't complain, but I'm worried about stress adding up. What should I do?

A: Think of stress as a range—a little is normal and usually harmless, but too much can affect health and performance in school. To figure out where on the range your student is, ask yourself these questions: *Is my child always tired or irritable? Does my child have difficulty concentrating or sleeping? Does my child seem unhappy? Is my child becoming self-critical?* A yes answer to any question indicates that your child may be overstressed.

To help your student regain some balance:

- **Talk about the situation.** Start by saying something like, "I know it takes hard work to do well in all your classes. It's really challenging to get everything done, isn't it?" Make it clear your child can always come to you if things get overwhelming or difficult to cope with.
- **Discuss realistic expectations.** Remind your child that no one can be all things to all people, and you don't expect your child to be.
- **Review priorities together.** School and learning come first. Help your student decide how to scale back on sports and social activities.



Are you reducing peer pressure's power?

In the middle school years, friends and peers have a growing influence on students' ideas and behavior. Are you making sure that your middle schooler is prepared to resist negative peer pressure? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

- ___ **1. Do you tell** your child that most middle schoolers feel some pressure to fit in?
- ___ **2. Do you talk** about ways your child can say *no* to risky behavior?
- ___ **3. Do you make sure** that your middle schooler understands your family's rules? Do you encourage your child to talk with you if feeling pressured to break a rule?
- ___ **4. Do you help** your child think about consequences? "What might happen if you skip school with your friends?"

- ___ **5. Do you discuss** the importance of doing the *right* thing and not just the *easy* thing?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are teaching your child to reject negative influences. For each no, try that idea.

"Always be a first-rate version of yourself, instead of a second-rate version of somebody else."

—Judy Garland

Foster school success with responsibilities at home

Fulfilling meaningful responsibilities at home helps children feel capable—a feeling that makes learning new things seem possible. Take your child's maturity into account, then consider assigning responsibility for:

- **Scheduling activities.** Have your child mark events on a family calendar and ask you in advance about transportation.
- **Budgeting.** Have your child make a plan for saving for a desired item. Ask, "What will you do to achieve your goal?"
- **Contributing at home.** Ask your middle schooler to participate in discussions about issues your family is facing. Assign your child a few regular chores.

Show the value of honesty

Honesty is vital for academic success. Students don't learn by copying answers from friends or having AI write their papers. Emphasize honesty's benefits to your child:

- **Honest people** never have to worry about being caught in a lie.
- **Honest people** have self-respect and the respect of others.
- **Honesty** earns freedom. You're more likely to grant privileges when you can trust your child.



Warm up for the future

College and careers are several years away for middle schoolers. But they are the right age now to start getting ready. Help your child:

- **Develop positive work habits.** Model promptness, responsibility, effort and respect. These pay off in school, too!
- **Explore interests** and learn about related courses of study and careers.
- **Learn about options.** Research the facts about two- and four-year colleges, technical schools, the military, etc.

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