

# Helping Students Learn<sup>®</sup>

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

MIDDLE SCHOOL



November 2023

## Help your middle schooler study smarter for end-of-unit tests

If your middle schooler tends to study randomly the night before a big test, it's time for a more organized approach.

Help your student develop a system for studying an entire chapter or unit. Several days before the test, have your child:

1. **Divide the material** into sections.
2. **Start by reviewing** the first section and any related notes or handouts. Your child may be tempted to race through and finish the whole unit, but it's more effective to study one section at a time.
3. **Imagine what questions** the teacher might ask about the material in that section. If no questions come to mind, your child should review the material again. Have your child jot down each question on a separate index card and write its answer on the back of the card.
4. **Proceed section by section.** If one section is particularly long or tricky, or if your child can think of several questions the teacher may ask about it, suggest breaking that section down into smaller parts.
5. **Identify new words and terms.** Now your child can go back through the material and look for unfamiliar terms and make cards for them.
6. **Study the cards** in short sessions for several days. You can support the effort by offering to use the cards to quiz your child.



## Share strategies for managing stress

Middle schoolers have a lot going on—in school, in their bodies and in their minds. They can easily become overwhelmed, anxious and stressed. And when students' anxiety goes up, their grades can go down.

Talk with your middle schooler about ways to manage stress. Your child could:

- **Write in a journal.** Writing can help your child clarify thoughts and feelings. It's also a helpful tool for solving problems.
- **Have fun with a friend.** They could take a walk or do something that makes them laugh, such as making a funny video.
- **Work on a hobby** (other than playing games online). Focusing on an enjoyable creative activity reduces stress.
- **Stretch and breathe.** Slow, gentle stretches and deep breathing can help children calm down when feeling overwhelmed.
- **Take a short power nap.** Getting adequate sleep is vital for stress reduction.

## Promote complex thinking

Your child is learning to evaluate, support answers with evidence and solve problems. To boost thinking skills, ask questions like:

- **Why do you like it?** It's not enough for your child to say something is a favorite. Ask your student to name characteristics that make it better than other things.
- **Which should we get?** Ask your child to research an item your family needs to buy. Which brand would be the best choice? Why?
- **How could we** do this better? For example, ask your child to brainstorm ways your family could save money on an electric or water bill.



## Volunteering is empowering

Volunteering helps children develop skills and understand that *they* can make a difference. Any volunteer work is valuable, but research shows that work that helps strangers, rather than friends or family, may have the biggest effect. In one study, it improved kids' feelings of self-worth for over one year.

Source: L.M. Padilla-Walker and others, "Longitudinal Change in Adolescents' Prosocial Behavior Toward Strangers, Friends, and Family," *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, Wiley.

## Instill strong writing habits

Help your child get into three habits that improve writing:

1. **Reading widely.** The more students read, the more examples of solid writing they see.
2. **Reading written work** aloud. This helps students catch repetitive, clunky or ungrammatical phrases, so they can fix them.
3. **Revising.** After writing a first draft, your child should rearrange, expand or clarify points that need it.



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## How can I get my child to tell me what's going on?

**Q:** My seventh grader is clearly upset about something, but won't tell me what it is. I want to help, but I don't want to be pushy. What should I do?

**A:** Reluctance to discuss problems with parents is common among adolescents. But when an issue drags on for days or weeks, it can affect health and schoolwork. So although it's likely that whatever is troubling your child is minor, you should keep trying to find out what it is.



To encourage your middle schooler to share:

- **Be direct.** Say to your child, "I feel like there's something you're not telling me. I want you to know I care about you and I'm here for you no matter what. You can talk to me about absolutely anything. It's my job to help you figure things out."
- **Set clear expectations.** "I respect your privacy and the fact that you want to handle things on your own, but I need you to tell me what's wrong. You can have a little more time to think it over by yourself, but then let's try to figure this out together after dinner tonight."
- **Enlist support.** If your student still refuses to talk, contact a pediatrician, school counselor, coach or other trusted figure in your child's life. Work together to discover and help your child manage whatever is going on.



## Are you helping your student build a strong learning foundation?

In middle school, students begin to have more choices about the direction their education will take. Are you helping your child make choices that support academic achievement? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

- \_\_\_ **1. Do you encourage** your child to choose challenging classes—especially in subjects of interest?
- \_\_\_ **2. Do you discuss** the importance of reading, and urge your child to read every day?
- \_\_\_ **3. Do you follow** news stories together and build your child's awareness of current events?
- \_\_\_ **4. Do you encourage** your child to study a foreign language, starting in middle school if possible?

- \_\_\_ **5. Do you talk** about ways your child's interests might mesh with future classes or a career?

### How well are you doing?

*More yes answers mean you are helping your child prepare for the future. For each no, try that idea.*

"The future is not something we enter. The future is something we create."  
—Leonard I. Sweet

## Help your child work with a changing body

The physical changes your child is going through are the biggest since infancy. Impulses that typically go with these changes (to fidget, snack, etc.) can be a distraction during study time. If your child frequently:

- **Gets up to move around**, suggest that your middle schooler try to work standing up. Or your child could study flashcards while walking around.
- **Wiggles and squirms**, encourage regular stretch breaks to ease "growing pains."
- **Stops to make a snack**, stock up on sliced raw veggies your child can grab at the start and munch on while studying.

Source: P. Lorain, "Squirming Comes Naturally to Middle School Students," National Education Association.

## List-making can help your child solve problems

Your child is facing a dilemma. "Should I do this, or not?" What if there was another choice?

To help your middle schooler explore *all* the options when problem-solving, suggest making a list, then narrowing it down to the three most sensible solutions. The list-making process reinforces that there are usually several ways to solve a problem.



## Review elements of respect

Respect involves many things. Explain that showing respect means your child should:

- **Think before acting**, and ask questions like, "Would I like to be treated this way?"
- **Disagree politely.** Talk about the need to choose words and tone carefully.
- **Treat property with care**, and return borrowed items on time and unharmed.

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