MIDDLE SCHOOL

Helping Students Learn®

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

October 2021

Improve learning outcomes by focusing on responsibility

You are in a unique position to support your child's school success. While the teachers specialize in helping him learn particular subjects, you can help him learn to be a better student. By reinforcing your middle schooler's sense of responsibility, for example, you'll help him succeed in class and out.



To strengthen this quality:

- **Teach your child** that he's responsible for his attitude and his decisions. If things are going wrong, help him see how his choices might have contributed to the situation. He may not realize that even little things, like his choice of words, tone or body language, can affect the way things turn out for him.
- **Insist that your middle schooler** take responsibility for his actions. That means allowing him to experience the consequences of those actions. If he's left an assignment until the last minute, don't help him complete it. Don't take forgotten items to school over and over again.
- **Make it clear that you value** responsibility-related traits like self-control and persistence. Praise your child when you see him demonstrating those qualities.
- **Let your child see** you take responsibility for your mistakes. "I left my tools out in the rain, and they rusted. I should have been more responsible." He'll learn more by your admission than he'd learn from a lecture.

Spark your child's desire to read

Studies show that students who read often for fun have higher scores in English, math, science and history than those who rarely read material that's not assigned. To help your child learn to enjoy reading and do more of it:

- **Read as a family.** Gather weekly to enjoy some good books. Show that reading is a fun way to relax.
- **Refresh your supply** of reading materials often. Browse the library's collection with your child. Explore book sales together.
- **Make it convenient.** Keep reading materials all around your home—especially in the kitchen, so your child can read while her popcorn is popping.
- **Don't insist** that your child finish every book she starts. It's OK to put down a boring book as long as she picks up another.
- **Discuss reading.** Ask your child to tell you about books she's liked.

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

Pictures build math memory

To help your child remember the math he's learning, suggest that he create an illustrated book of terms and concepts. He could include drawings of:

- **Shapes.** He can use his guide to remember the differences between a *rhombus* and a *trapezoid*.
- **Real-life math.** He could draw a pizza cut into eight equal pieces to visualize fractions, for example. One piece is one eighth, two is two-eighths or one-fourth.

Ask for your child's input

Encourage your child to participate in discussions about things that affect family life. Of course, you'll make the final decisions, but ask your child for her opinion and consider it. Having her ideas taken seriously motivates her to think and empowers her to contribute at home and in class.



What could the future hold?

It's not realistic to expect your middle schooler to know what he wants to do for the rest of his life. But it is realistic to ask him to begin thinking about it. Ask him to write down his thoughts about questions like:



- **What are** my strengths in and out of school?
- **What do** I love doing?
- **Am I** happier working with others or alone?
- **What would** I like to learn more about?
- **What is** important to me right now?

Save and date his answers. Then have him update them regularly. His ideas will probably change over time. But the things that stay the same can provide clues to where his future career path may lie.

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Q&A My daughter struggles with writing. What should I do?

Q: Every time my child has a writing assignment, she just sits and stares at the blank page. How can I help her stop dreading and start writing?



A: : Middle schoolers are often reluctant writers. Many worry that what they write won't be any good. Tell your child that even professional writers sometimes have these feelings. To help her move forward:

- **Have a brainstorming session.** Encourage your child to make a list of as many ideas as she can, just as they come. Later she can choose what to use and in what order.
- **Encourage her to write** on a computer if possible. This makes it easier to make revisions.
- **Hold back on criticism.** If she asks you to review her writing, focus on what your child is trying to say, not on mechanical errors.
- **Make sure she plans time to edit.** No one writes perfectly from the start. Have her read her work out loud. Does it really say what she means? Don't fix mistakes for her—she'll feel more capable if she does it herself.

When your child is not facing a deadline, have her try free writing. She should write anything that comes to mind, no matter how silly. Or, ask your child to write about something she enjoys.

Parent Quiz Are you inspiring your child's best effort?

Successful students know that reaching their potential involves working to the best of their abilities. Are you encouraging your child to strive for his personal best? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

___**1. Do you praise** your child's positive study habits? "You are really making the most of your time by getting started early."

___**2. Do you notice** your child's progress? "You knew no Spanish in August, and you can say whole sentences now!"

___**3. Do you encourage** your child to take pride in his work? "It must feel great to know you double-checked every problem."

___**4. Do you help** your child focus on what he can learn from the mistakes he makes?

___**5. Do you set** an example? "I'm going to keep working on this—I can make it better."

How well are you doing?

More yes *answers mean you are nurturing your child's motivation to strive. For each* no, *try that idea.*

"Striving for success without hard work is like trying to harvest where you haven't planted."
—David Bly

Ask the teacher how to help

In middle school, you may need to ask for a conference with your child's teachers. Doing so is a valuable way to learn how to support your student. To get the most out of your conference:

- **Create a list** of things you want to ask and tell the teacher.
- **Ask questions** if you don't understand educational terms the teacher uses.
- **Keep an open mind.** Listen carefully, even if you disagree with the teacher.
- **Take notes** you can refer to if you forget or if you and the teacher meet again.

Learning is the ultimate goal



Decades of research shows that setting goals improves student performance in many academic areas. When kids set goals, it's important for them to identify the steps they will take to achieve them. But don't let your child get so focused on checking off steps quickly that he loses sight of his real goal: mastering skills and gaining knowledge.

Source: "Student Goal Setting: An Evidence-Based Practice," Midwest Comprehensive Center at American Institutes for Research.

Reduce the stress of tests

Test anxiety is a problem for many middle schoolers. To help your child relax so she can do her best:

- **Listen.** Just talking through her concerns may make the test less scary.
- **Help** your child create a study schedule. Preparation is the best cure for anxiety.
- **Remind** your child of her strengths.

If she does well, celebrate. If she doesn't, calmly go over what went wrong and discuss ways she can improve next time.

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