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# Middle School Parents<sup>®</sup>

*still make the difference!*



## Research-proven strategies boost your child's brain power

Your middle schooler should have a designated place to do schoolwork. But that's not the *only* place your child should study. Research shows that students remember content better if they review material in different places.

To optimize learning and memory, students should:

- 1. Study the same information in different locations.** This forces the brain to make multiple associations with the material. When the brain relates the information to more than one background, the information has a better chance of sticking.
- 2. Vary the material they study in a single study session.** For example, your child might alternate studying vocabulary words and reading the history assignment. Concentrating on multiple skills, rather than on one at a time, leaves a deeper impression on the brain.
- 3. Space out study sessions** over a period of days. This helps the brain retain the material for longer than a day or two. Cramming for a test the night before may get students a passing grade. But it won't lead to real long-term learning. To the brain, a quick fill leads to a quick empty.
- 4. Write down a few notes** after each class. This forces them to recall the information they learned.

Source: "Applying Cognitive Psychology to Enhance Educational Practice," Bjork Learning And Forgetting Lab, UCLA.

## Nutrition makes a difference to school success



Years of studies show that healthy diet can help students stay alert during class and retain information.

Unfortunately, simply stocking your home with nutritious foods doesn't necessarily mean your middle schooler will eat them—especially if you aren't home during the day to offer them.

So what's the solution? Help your child become an informed eater who knows how to make responsible food choices independently. Here's how:

- **Expose your child** to a variety of foods. Plan weekly meals together and set a goal of trying one new healthy food each week.
- **Remove temptations.** Get rid of soda and junk food. If all the foods you offer are healthy, your child will make better choices.
- **Make it easy to drink water.** Hydration is vital to brain function. Give your child a large water bottle to drink from throughout the day.
- **Insist on breakfast.** Offer foods high in fiber and low in added sugar. A whole-grain bagel and a banana is a fast and easy breakfast option.

# Improve your child's readiness to learn by reducing stress



Students under excessive stress are at risk of having difficulty focusing in class and remembering what they learn.

To help manage stress, suggest that your middle schooler:

- **Take several deep breaths.** It may sound simple, but it works surprisingly well. Taking time to stop and think calmly about a problem may help your child put it into perspective and discover a solution.
- **Focus on health.** Twenty to 30 minutes of exercise can relieve tension and clear your child's head. Eating right and getting adequate sleep every night also helps keep stress under control.

- **Keep a journal.** Some kids find that it's easier to write down their feelings than to talk about them. This is a great way to relieve stress.
- **Take a break from screens.** Unplugging from the digital world gives your child time to relax, read a book, listen to music or daydream.

Source: S. Vogel and others, "Stress Affects the Neural Ensemble for Integrating New Information and Prior Knowledge," *Neuroimage*, Elsevier.

**"It's not the load that breaks you down, it's the way you carry it."**

—Lou Holtz

# Consider tutoring to address ongoing academic struggles



If your middle schooler has been struggling in school, it may be time for some one-on-one learning support.

Getting a tutor could be the answer to your child's academic problems—especially if:

- **Schoolwork** has become a daily battle.
- **Your child's grades** are slipping more by the day.
- **The entire family** is feeling the stress of school difficulties.

Ask your child's school counselor to recommend in person and online tutoring resources.

Then, to help your middle schooler get the most from tutoring sessions:

- **Stand back.** Whether sessions are virtual or in-person, don't pitch in. Give the tutor space to do the job.

- **Provide a distraction-free setting.** Be sure there is a quiet, well-lit place for your child and the tutor to work.
- **Set reachable goals.** Don't expect your middle schooler to earn straight A's right after beginning tutoring sessions. Instead, set realistic short-term goals, such as raising your child's English grade a few percentage points per month. Meeting these goals may be your best indicator as to whether the tutoring is working.
- **Don't be afraid to make a change.** Not all tutor-student relationships work out. If your middle schooler isn't meeting goals after a few months, it may be time to try someone or something new.

Source: J. Schumm, Ph.D., *How to Help Your Child with Homework*, Free Spirit Publishing.

# Are you helping your child focus on the future?



Middle school students aren't quite ready to begin filling out college or job applications. But they are ready to begin thinking

about their future. To find out if you are helping your middle schooler plan for the future, answer *yes* or *no* to the following questions:

- \_\_\_ **1. Do you talk** about your child's interests and hobbies to help uncover talents and passions?
- \_\_\_ **2. Do you recommend** your child find extracurricular activities that align with strengths and interests?
- \_\_\_ **3. Do you encourage your child** to talk to people about their jobs and what they like best about them?
- \_\_\_ **4. Do you discuss** careers your child might like to pursue in the future and the educational requirements to qualify for them?
- \_\_\_ **5. Do you help** your child find mentors or volunteer opportunities in fields of interest?

**How well are you doing?**

Mostly *yes* answers mean you and your child are preparing a strong foundation for the future. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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to Help Their Children.

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# Middle school years are key for preventing substance abuse



Drugs change brains. So once people become addicted to drugs, it will always be harder to stop using them.

Brain researchers know the best way to prevent drug abuse is to keep people from ever using illicit drugs. The middle school years are a time when prevention messages are critically important.

People are more likely to turn to drugs in times of transition. Adults facing job loss or divorce may use drugs to feel better. For adolescents, the challenge of changing schools and adapting to new learning environments can make drugs seem appealing.

Middle schoolers also want to try new things. Drugs and alcohol may seem to offer new experiences. Since middle schoolers' judgment and decision-making skills are still

developing, they may not see the risks associated with their use.

What can you do as a parent?

- **Ask about** what your child has learned in school about substance abuse. Reinforce those messages at home.
- **Send clear messages.** Say your child should avoid illicit drugs, including alcohol and nicotine products. Also talk about the life-threatening problem of misusing prescription drugs.
- **Set clear rules and enforce them.** Praise appropriate behavior. Families who are consistent find they don't have to be punitive.
- **Build a strong relationship** with your child. Do things together as a family. Enjoy spending time on shared activities.

Source: "Preventing Drug Abuse: The Best Strategy," National Institute on Drug Abuse.

# Foreign language study builds key skills for learning and more



Today, fewer students in the U.S. are learning to speak a language other than English. But research shows there are significant benefits to learning another language.

When students study foreign languages, they enhance their:

1. **Memory skills.** Language students must learn and remember lots of new vocabulary. They find that strengthening their memory is like strengthening a muscle. The more they use it, the stronger it gets.
2. **Understanding** of their first language. Students start to figure out how language works. That understanding helps them improve

writing, reading, and even testing skills. Students who speak a second language consistently score higher on standardized tests.

3. **Problem-solving skills.** Studies show that students who speak two languages also do better in math and science.
4. **Sense of achievement.** Learning another language is a challenge. As students master it, they see they can tackle difficult subjects.
5. **Ability to get a job.** Many employers want to hire people who can speak more than one language.

Source: "What Does Research Show About the Benefits of Language Learning?" American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

**Q:** My middle schooler mopes around a lot and seems very unhappy. How can I know if my child is just sad or truly depressed?

## Questions & Answers

**A:** Middle schoolers are known for their mood swings. Because of hormonal changes, they can be up one day and down the next.

Poor mental health among adolescents has been a widespread problem, so you are wise to be on the lookout for depression.

Here are some facts: Kids who have a depressed parent are at greater risk of getting it. So are kids who are under stress, have a learning disorder, or are experiencing a loss.

Your child might be depressed if one or more of the following signs persist for a few weeks:

- **Frequent sadness**, crying, anger or irritability.
- **Loss of interest in school** or formally favorite activities.
- **Feelings of worthlessness** or guilt.
- **Difficulty sleeping**, or problems oversleeping.
- **No energy.**
- **Loss or change in appetite** or weight.
- **Poor communication.**
- **Difficulty concentrating.**
- **Frequent headaches** or stomachaches.
- **Preoccupation with death** or suicide.

If you suspect your child is depressed, seek professional help immediately. It may take persistence to find an available provider—but keep trying. In the meantime, be available to discuss any concerns your child might have. Listen. Show respect and let your child know you are here to help.



# It Matters: Responsibility

## Help your middle schooler develop leadership skills



Many people think of a leader as someone who gives direction. To some extent, that is true. But true

leadership has just as much to do with listening, learning, planning and being an example.

The qualities that make effective leaders can also help children be better students. To promote leadership traits, encourage your middle schooler to be:

- **Caring.** Effective leaders are always ready to offer help to anyone who needs it.
  - **Open to new ideas.** Leaders know they don't know it all. They listen and consider input from others.
  - **Organized.** Leaders plan ahead. They know that leaving projects to the last minute usually produces poor results.
  - **Flexible.** Leaders don't get stuck in the rut of doing everything the same way every time. They are willing to negotiate and try new things.
  - **Optimistic.** Leaders trust the people they work with. They are enthusiastic. They expect things to go right, and because of their leadership, things usually do.
  - **Resilient.** Leaders know how to handle losses and move forward when things don't go as planned.
- In addition to encouraging specific leadership traits in your child, set a positive example by leading your family with compassion and fairness.

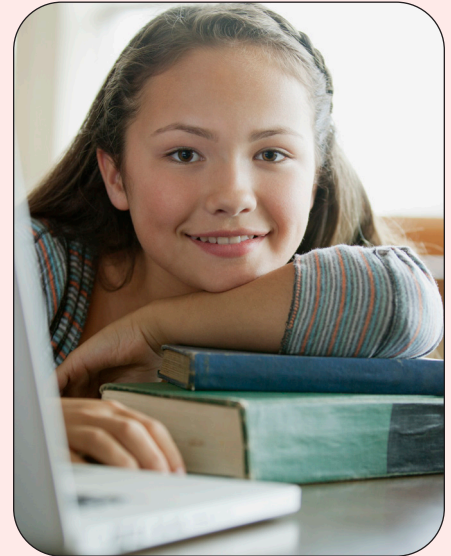
Source: B.A. Lewis, *What Do You Stand For? For Teens: A Guide to Building Character*, Free Spirit Publishing.

## Expect your child to keep promises and commitments

It's important for students to keep their commitments. It teaches them to take responsibility for their actions and to follow through on what they start—which helps them develop a strong sense of self-discipline and responsibility.

Encourage your child to:

- **Think before agreeing** to do something. It's great to take on new responsibilities, but only if your child feels capable and has the time. Whether it's agreeing to tutor a friend in math or helping a neighbor shovel snow, your child should always plan to follow through.
- **Avoid making excuses.** After missing a commitment, your child needs to be accountable. Encourage your middle schooler to acknowledge the mistake, apologize and ask how to make it up to the person.



- **Honor personal commitments.** Setting a goal and creating a plan to achieve it is like making a promise. Living up to that promise will boost your middle schooler's self-confidence, productivity and happiness.

## Facing consequences & solving problems builds responsibility



Middle schoolers aren't always responsible. But some have never *had to be*. Whenever those kids face a problem, their families try to fix it. That may solve some problems today. But it will create bigger problems in the future.

To foster accountability, help your middle schooler:

- **Solve problems independently.** If your child earns a grade that seems "unfair," encourage your

student to talk to the teacher about it. Don't immediately contact the teacher on your child's behalf.

- **Consider the consequences.** Ask questions to help your child think about potential results of an action before taking it.
- **Learn from experience.** Your child can't learn from mistakes if you always come to the rescue. So if that project isn't completed on time, let your middle schooler experience and learn from the consequences.