

November 2024
Vol. 28, No. 3

Middle School Parents[®]

still make the difference!



Too much stress can decrease your child's learning potential

Middle schoolers often have a lot on their plates—and on their minds. They can easily become overwhelmed, stressed and anxious. And when their anxiety goes up, their grades can go down.

If your child seems stressed, offer ways to relax. Your child could:

- **Enjoy time with a friend.** Suggest they take a walk outside or do something that makes them laugh, such as watching a favorite funny movie.
- **Spend time on a hobby** (other than playing games online). Focusing on an enjoyable activity reduces stress.
- **Stretch.** Stretching increases blood flow and can lower stress levels. Tell your child to try a few minutes of slow, gentle stretches.
- **Breathe deeply.** A short session of slow deep breathing can calm your child when feeling overwhelmed. Practicing it for a brief time each day can lower your child's overall stress levels.
- **Take a power nap.** Sleep is vital for stress reduction. A 15- to 30-minute nap in the afternoon can give your child an extra boost. Keep naps under one hour.
- **Write in a journal.** Writing can help your child clarify thoughts and feelings. Journaling can also be a great tool for solving problems.
- **Listen to favorite music.** Music can improve your middle schooler's mood and help release negative emotions.

Writing letters helps your child build vital skills



Middle schoolers are more likely to send a text than to sit down and write a good old-fashioned

letter. Yet letter writing is still a very useful skill. Writing letters helps middle schoolers:

- **Practice sentence structure,** grammar and punctuation.
- **Strengthen memory** and storytelling skills. Most people share their experiences when they write letters.
- **Improve communication skills.** Students get practice expressing thoughts clearly and effectively.

Here are three strategies to get your child writing letters:

1. **Keep a writing basket** in a visible spot. Fill it with everything someone would need to write a letter—paper, pens, envelopes, stamps and an address book.
2. **Challenge your child** to write one letter every week. Your middle schooler could write to a friend or relative.
3. **Collect postcards** when your family visits a new place. Ask your child to write about the experience and send the cards to relatives and friends.

Motivate your middle schooler to start thinking about the future



College is years away, but that doesn't mean your child shouldn't start thinking about it and making plans now.

Studies show that college graduates are more likely than non-graduates to:

- **Live healthier, longer lives.**
- **Stay employed.**
- **Enjoy their jobs.**
- **Change jobs more easily.**
- **Earn significantly higher salaries.**

To help your child begin considering future options:

- **Talk about interests.** Ask your child, "What do you like to do? What are you passionate about?" Whether it's graphic design or physical fitness, there's likely a higher education program geared toward it. Your middle schooler won't be enrolling anytime soon, but now is the time to "plant the seed" and get your child thinking about ways to continue education after high school.

- **Encourage goal setting.** What would your child like to be in 10 years? A college graduate? A successful executive? Ask what your child envisions and encourage creating a plan to get there. Specifically, talk about what your middle schooler can do now (such as studying harder or taking tougher classes) to reach goals.
- **Widen horizons.** There are too many careers to count, and odds are your child hasn't heard of many of them. So go online together and research various jobs. Get your child excited about the different options available.

"The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."

—Eleanor Roosevelt

It's time to give your child's technology skills a little boost



Most middle schoolers are very savvy when it comes to the latest apps and computer programs.

But there are additional technology skills that can enhance your child's success in school. Here are a few:

- **Judgment.** Some information online is excellent and helpful. And a lot of it is trash. Can your child tell the difference? Talk about how to determine if sources are credible. Do they present facts or opinions? Is the information up to date?
- **Planning.** How will your middle schooler use online information?

Will your child add it to a research paper? Use it to gain a deeper understanding of a particular concept or subject?

- **Creativity.** Most students know how to create online presentations and multimedia projects. But are there new ways to present information? Challenge your child to explore and use a variety of presentation tools.
- **Problem-solving.** If your child has difficulty using a digital device, don't immediately step in. Instead, suggest ways your student could attempt to solve the problem first.

Are you helping your child work with teachers?



It's normal for middle schoolers to like some teachers better than others. Learning to get along with authority

figures is an important life lesson.

Are you helping your child get along with teachers? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

1. **Do you remind your child** of all students' responsibility to be courteous and respectful to teachers?
2. **Do you help your child keep** feelings in perspective? Students don't have to like a teacher to learn something in that class.
3. **Do you help figure out** the cause of any issues your child is having in a class?
4. **Do you encourage your child** to try to work with teachers to resolve issues that arise?
5. **Do you ask to speak** to a teacher if your child is unable to work through an issue independently?

How well are you doing?

Mostly *yes* answers mean you're helping your middle schooler learn how to work with teachers. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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Practical Ideas for Parents
to Help Their Children.

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P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474.
Fax: 1-800-216-3667.

Or visit: www.parent-institute.com.

Published monthly September through May.
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Publisher: Doris McLaughlin.
Publisher Emeritus: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.
Editor: Rebecca Hasty Miyares.

Teach your child the value of persistence and determination



Sometimes it may seem easier to give up on a tough assignment than to push through and complete it. However, that won't get your child very far in life.

Persistence and determination are essential parts of learning. These traits help large projects and difficult assignments seem achievable—and lead to better grades.

To encourage your child to see challenging schoolwork through to the end:

- **Notice progress.** Say things like, “You’re really coming along with that. If you keep on like this, you’ll have something to be proud of.”
- **Encourage regular study breaks.** Try one five-minute break after 25 minutes of working. Breaks are a time to relax and recharge.

- **Teach positive self-talk.** Saying things like, “I am going to do this” or “I know I can do a great job on this,” can motivate your middle schooler through the most difficult academic tasks.
- **Be a role model.** If you’ve been putting off a big chore, decide to see it through. Say, “Today, I am going to work until I get this finished.” Then, follow through.
- **Treat your child** to something special when a challenging task is complete. You could watch a movie together or cook a fun dinner. When your child shows persistence through a tough task, it’s definitely time to celebrate!

Source: M. Borba, Parents Do Make a Difference: How to Raise Kids with Solid Character, Strong Minds and Caring Hearts, Jossey-Bass.

Q: I know that attendance is important, but we’re planning to travel over the holidays next month, and my seventh grader will miss one week of school. How can I keep my child from falling behind?

Questions & Answers

A: First, take a look at your itinerary. Is it possible to alter your plans so your trip falls within the school’s break? That’s the only way to ensure your child won’t miss out on important learning.

If your travel dates are written in stone, though, here are three things you can do to show that school matters and help your child stay on top of things:

1. Talk to your child’s teachers.

Well in advance, explain the situation and ask if they’re planning to assign readings or worksheets while you are away. See if your child can get started early. Find out which teachers maintain updated classroom websites, and see if your child can follow each day’s lesson from afar. But keep in mind: Teachers are under no obligation to adjust to your vacation schedule.

2. Focus on learning while you are away. Explore museums and cultural or historical attractions and discuss them as a family. Try to immerse your middle schooler in educational activities that are not available at home.

3. Set aside time for reading and writing. Even if your child has no assigned work to complete, insist on reading for pleasure and writing about the trip in a notebook. A vacation from school should not be a vacation from learning!

Open communication plays a critical role in school safety



Schools today take many steps to keep students safe. But they can’t do it alone—they need families’ help.

One of the most effective ways you can contribute to a safe school environment is to talk together every day about what’s going on at school and in your child’s life.

Have open discussions about:

- **The school discipline policy.** Talk about the reasons for certain rules. Review the consequences for breaking the rules.
- **The school’s safety** and security procedures. If you don’t know what they are, find out.
- **Personal safety issues**, such as ways to keep safe when traveling to and from school.

- **Your family’s values**, rules and expectations for your child.
 - **The impact of violence** in the media—TV, books, video games, music and movies.
 - **Strategies for solving problems** peacefully and diffusing tense situations.
 - **Concerns about friends** or classmates who may be dangerous to themselves or others.
 - **Social media** and the need to use it responsibly.
 - **The importance of telling** a teacher or other adult if your child sees something that doesn’t seem right.
- And remember: If *you* hear something that concerns you, inform the school immediately. Schools are safest when families, students and educators work together.

It Matters: Positive Discipline

Effective ways to handle your child's back talk



Even the child who gave you no trouble in elementary school may develop a “smart mouth” in middle school. At this stage in life, adolescents begin to question and challenge. They often come out with harp, dismissive and often disrespectful statements.

To curb your child's back talk:

- **Be a role model.** Your middle schooler hears rude and mocking language everywhere. But your child shouldn't hear it from you. Treat your child with respect, even when behavior doesn't merit it.
- **Point out** your child's language. Say something like “That is disrespectful” or “Your tone is not appropriate.”
- **Consider your child's intent.** Sometimes, what seems like back talk is your child's attempt to give an opinion that differs from yours. Kids are allowed to have different opinions, but they need to learn how to express them appropriately. Demonstrate how by restating your child's points using a respectful tone.
- **Use consequences.** Calmly say how you feel about the way your child speaks to you. State the consequences: “You are allowed to be angry with me. But you are not allowed to speak disrespectfully. If you continue to do so, you will lose your phone for a week.” Then, follow through!
- **Acknowledge improvement.** If your child is making an effort to cut the back talk, say you notice.

Talk to your middle schooler about the importance of respect

For school to be a productive place to learn, students must learn to respect themselves and others, including teachers, school staff and classmates. Still, many kids aren't quite sure what respect really involves.

Talk with your child about the role respect plays in:

- **Behavior.** Your child should always think before acting. “Would I like to be treated this way?” “Will this action give me a positive result without producing a negative one for others?”
- **Disagreements.** Your child can disagree with someone and still be respectful. Demonstrate how to choose words carefully.
- **Property.** Your middle schooler should take care of belongings and return borrowed items on time and in the same or better condition.



- **Friendships.** Your child should choose friends who treat people with respect. Say that friends' behavior may also be seen as a reflection on your child.

Consistency and compassion are keys to effective discipline



There is no one-size-fits-all method of correcting middle schoolers' behavior, especially since they are constantly growing and changing. However, you can adopt a consistent discipline approach. To do this:

- **Control your emotions.** It's tough to think clearly when you're agitated. Avoid imposing consequences for misbehavior when you're angry. Instead, take a moment to calm down before addressing the issue.
- **Notice emotions.** If your child is upset, acknowledge those feelings. Give your child time to regain composure before further discussion.
- **Listen to your child.** This doesn't mean letting your child get out of a consequence. It means demonstrating respect even as you enforce the consequence.
- **Draw the line.** Flexibility is important, but some issues should be non-negotiable. Make sure you are clear about your zero-tolerance policy for things like smoking and substance abuse.