Middle School Parents®
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Too much stress can decrease students' 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, help her find ways to relax. She 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.** Doing yoga is linked to 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 she is feeling overwhelmed. Practicing it for a brief time each day can lower her 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 the extra boost she needs. Keep naps under one hour
- **Write in a journal.** Writing can help your child clarify her thoughts and feelings. Journaling can also be a great tool for solving problems.
- **Listen to her favorite music.** Music can improve your child's mood and help her release negative emotions.

Ask questions that will make your child think



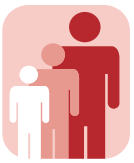
Middle schoolers need critical thinking skills to do research, make decisions and solve problems. As your child progresses through school, his teachers will expect higher-level thinking. Instead of just giving an answer, your child will need to give examples to support it.

Help your child develop more mature thinking skills by asking him questions such as:

- **"Why are your favorites** your favorites?" Whether it's a singer or a character in a book, explore the appeal with your child. It's not enough for him to say he likes them. Ask him to tell you some characteristics that make him like them.
- **"How can we save money** as a family?" Review a family expense, such as the electric or water bill, and challenge your child to find ways to save money. If he does, ask him what he thinks the family should do with the savings—and why.
- **"Can you think of a volunteer** opportunity for our family?" Ask your child to do some research and give information that supports his choice.

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Volunteering can boost your middle schooler's confidence



The middle school years can be tough. Schoolwork is harder. Friendships often change. And it seems as though physical changes may never end. That can lead even the most confident kids to struggle with self-confidence.

Studies show that volunteering is a great way to increase self-esteem in adolescents. Helping others lets kids develop skills and understand that *they* can make a difference.

Any volunteer work is valuable. But research reveals that reaching out to strangers may have the biggest impact on kids. Performing acts of kindness for people your child doesn't know can produce positive feelings that last as long as one year.

Volunteer work doesn't have to be on a grand scale. Your child could sign up to work one shift preparing sandwiches for a group that feeds the hungry. He could get a group of friends together to join a walk to raise money for a cause.

Consider volunteering as a family. Whether it's collecting food for a food bank or delivering meals to those in need through an organization like Meals on Wheels, your family can grow closer as you help others.

No matter what volunteer activity your middle schooler decides to engage in, be sure to stress how he will be making a difference. It's that sense of accomplishment that helps kids improve their self-esteem.

Source: J. Fraga, "Helping Strangers May Help Teens' Self-Esteem," National Public Radio.

"Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see."

—Mark Twain

Three strategies help your child become a better writer



Not every student is a born writer. But students who write well tend to do better in school than students who don't.

To help your child improve her writing, have her:

1. **Read it aloud.** After she completes a writing assignment for class, ask your child to read it to you. She can also read it to herself. Suggest she mark anything that sounds repetitive, clunky or ungrammatical as she reads.
2. **Revise it.** Even a great first draft can almost always be improved with careful editing. So have your child go back through her work to see where it can be tightened up, expanded or clarified.
3. **Ask for help.** If her piece of writing still seems a little flat or weak, suggest that your child ask her teacher to recommend a reputable writing website. Together, explore its ideas for strengthening writing.

Beyond that, remind your child that one of the best ways to become a stronger writer is simply to read. The more she surrounds herself with words, the more examples she'll see of solid writing. And that familiarity will help when it's time for her to put her thoughts into words.

Are you setting your child up for future success?



The choices your child makes in middle school can influence her success in high school and beyond. Are you doing all you can to set your child up for success? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

___**1. Do you encourage** your middle schooler to take the most rigorous classes she can successfully handle each year?

___**2. Do you share** with your child the importance of reading and urge her to read often?

___**3. Do you watch** the news with your child and encourage her to learn about current affairs to boost her awareness of civics and history?

___**4. Do you encourage** your child to take a foreign language? Starting in middle school can give your child a foundation for high school.

___**5. Have you talked** with your child about her interests and ways they might translate to a career?

How well are you doing?

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are helping your child focus on the future. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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A five-step process can help your child make better decisions



Want your middle schooler to make more responsible decisions? Encourage her to rely on this five-step process whenever she's faced with a dilemma:

1. **Assess the situation.** Your child can't make a wise decision if the issue at hand seems murky. So remind her to clearly define it by asking herself, "What's the main thing I'm concerned about?"
2. **Explore her options.** What are some ways your child could handle the problem? Have her make a mental list, then narrow it down to the three most sensible choices. This list-making step is critical because it illustrates that there are usually several options for solving a problem.
3. **Consider the disadvantages.** Have your child think about the cons of each of her top three ideas. If a certain option has a particularly serious consequence, this is a good time to rule out that option.
4. **Consider the advantages.** Now ask your child to figure out the pros of her top choices. Does one option have major advantages over others? That may be the winner.
5. **Decide on a solution.** Now that she's weighed the pros and cons of each possible option, your child can make her decision with confidence.

Source: R. Burke, Ph.D. and others, *Common Sense Parenting: Using Your Head as Well as Your Heart to Raise School-Aged Children*, Boys Town Press.

Sitting still during homework time is challenging for kids



If your middle schooler can't seem to sit still during homework time, it's probably because he can't! And if he can't seem to stop snacking, it may be because he needs that food.

Your child is entering adolescence. And this marks the biggest period of physical change he has experienced since infancy.

Middle schoolers often:

- **Get up out of their chairs.** As adolescents grow, their bones (including their tailbones) begin to harden. Sitting too long can cause nerve pain. Getting up is a natural defense against that discomfort. Your child may want to try doing some of his homework standing up. Or he could study as he walks around the house.
- **Fidget.** Even if they manage to stay seated, middle schoolers spend lots of time fidgeting. In adolescence, bone growth outpaces muscle growth, meaning kids' muscles are constantly being tugged and pulled. This causes so-called "growing pains." Stretching can help relieve them, so encourage regular stretch breaks during homework time.
- **Raid the refrigerator.** It's not just kids' bones and muscles that are growing. Their stomachs are, too—and it takes more food to fill them. Not only that, but all that physical growth requires serious amounts of nutritious fuel. Stock up on snacks like sliced raw veggies and let your child munch while he's studying.

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

Q: There's clearly something bothering my seventh grader, but he refuses to open up to me. How can I get him to tell me what's going on without being pushy?

Questions & Answers

A: Adolescents and teens are notoriously tight-lipped when it comes to sharing problems with their parents. But you *must* keep trying to find out what is bothering your son.

Although it's very likely the "something" that's troubling him is relatively minor, it's important to address it. This is especially true if the issue drags on for days or weeks.

To encourage your middle schooler to share what's happening without feeling pressured in the process:

- **Tell him you are concerned.** "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. Part of my job as a parent is to help you figure things out."
- **Be clear** about your 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 let's try to figure this out together after dinner tonight."
- **Call in reinforcements.** If your son still refuses to talk, go to a teacher, pediatrician, school counselor, coach or other trusted figure in his life. Work together to discover and help your child manage whatever is going on.

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It Matters: 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 she shouldn't hear it from you. Treat your child with respect, even when her 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 show you that her opinion differs from yours. She is allowed to have a different opinion, but she needs to express it appropriately. Show her how by restating her point using a respectful tone.
- **Use consequences.** Calmly tell your child how you feel about the way she 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 you notice that your child is making an effort to cut the back talk, say so.

Consistency and compassion are keys to effective discipline

There is no one-size-fits-all method of disciplining middle schoolers, 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 disciplining your child when you're angry. Instead, take a moment to calm down before addressing the issue.
- **Notice your child's emotions.** If he's clearly upset, help him calm down (or at least acknowledge his feelings) before you begin disciplining him.
- **Listen.** This doesn't mean letting your child talk his way 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 illegal drug use.

Talk to your middle schooler about the importance of respect



To be successful in school, your child must learn to respect herself 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. She should ask herself, "Would I like to be treated this way?" "Will this action give me a positive result?" If she can answer *yes*, she will probably act respectfully.
- **Disagreements.** Your child can disagree with someone and still be respectful. Teach her how to choose her words carefully.
- **Property.** Your child should take care of her things and return items she borrows on time and in the same or better condition.
- **Friendships.** Your child should surround herself with peers who treat her and others with respect. Remind her that people will judge her in part by her friends' behavior. That may be all it takes to convince her to choose her friends carefully.