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Middle School Parents[®]

still make the difference!



Promote a sense of duty, self-reliance and persistence

Of course you want your child to become a responsible person. But not all middle schoolers know what that means. To help your child understand what responsibility looks like, talk about the traits that responsible people share, and suggest ways to model them.

For instance, responsible people usually demonstrate:

- **A sense of duty.** They do what is necessary—even if they don't feel like it. For your child, that might mean getting ready for school on time, completing assignments on time and doing chores.
- **Self-reliance.** Responsible students do as much as they can for themselves. True, your middle schooler

is too young to be completely self-reliant. But your child can take a big step in that direction. Empower your child to handle some tasks independently, such as making a simple meal and packing a school lunch.

- **Persistence.** They don't give up, and they don't abandon goals that seem out of reach. Your child can demonstrate persistence by hanging in there when the going gets tough. If your student doesn't earn a spot on a school team this year, for example, your child can swork on sharpening skills and try again next time.

Source: M.S. Josephson and others, *Parenting to Build Character in Your Teen*, Boys Town Press.

Connect with teachers to boost learning



While parent-teacher conferences are often brief in middle school, they are still worthwhile.

To make the most of these important meetings with your child's teachers:

- **Talk with your child** beforehand. Does your child have any concerns about a teacher, a class or a large project?
- **Make a list.** Don't assume you'll remember everything you want to talk about with teachers. Write down your questions and notes about topics you'd like to cover.
- **Start on a high note.** Begin the meeting by saying something positive. "My child enjoyed the last project for your class." An upbeat start sets a positive tone for teamwork.
- **Keep an open mind.** If a teacher has concerns about your child ask for specific examples of the problem. Share information the teacher may not have about your student.
- **Develop a plan.** If one of your child's teachers mentions an issue, ask for strategies to help address it. Problems are easier to solve when teachers and families work together.

Prior knowledge helps kids understand and relate to text



Research shows that children's ability to understand and relate to what they read is linked to what they

know before they start reading. This is called *prior knowledge*.

Having some knowledge before reading means students won't have to try to figure out the text only from the information in front of them. Prior knowledge of a topic may also keep students more engaged in what they're reading.

To increase this knowledge:

- **Encourage your child to read** news articles. They offer exposure to topics and themes that your child will likely encounter in schoolwork.

- **Expand your child's world.** Watch educational programs and visit historic sites. These experiences may connect to something your child reads in the future.
- **Share your experiences.** Talk with your child about places you have been or jobs you have had.

Source: K. Allan and M. Miller, *Literacy and Learning: Strategies for Middle and Secondary School Teachers*, Houghton Mifflin.

"Develop a passion for learning. If you do, you will never cease to grow."

—Anthony J. D'Angelo

Teach your middle schooler to focus on six key areas of writing



It can be hard to help middle schoolers with their writing. They're often sensitive to criticism and resistant to

suggestions for improvement.

Try offering guidance *before* your child begins writing. Encourage your student to focus on these six key areas:

1. **Ideas and content.** Your child's writing should be interesting to read and should stick to the topic at hand. The reader should be able to understand and follow what your child is trying to say.
2. **Choice of words.** Strong writing should "paint a picture." When your child describes something, the reader should be able to visualize it. Words should add value or meaning, not simply take up space.
3. **Organization.** Solid writing has a clear beginning, middle and ending. It clearly presents a main idea. Other sentences give details that support the main idea.
4. **Sentence structure.** Writing should be clear and understandable. The sentences should have a natural flow, similar to a conversation. Each sentence should be distinct. Your child should avoid repeating word patterns. For example, one or two sentences may begin with "I feel" or "This is" but the others should all begin differently.
5. **Voice.** Your child's writing should represent your child's personality, feelings and tone.
6. **Mechanics.** Your child should proofread work and use correct spelling, grammar and punctuation.

Do you help your child work with tough teachers?



Sooner or later, every student encounters a tough teacher. Are you helping your child rise to this challenge?

Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

- ___ 1. **Have you explained** how your child will need to work with all kinds of people throughout life?
- ___ 2. **Have you discussed** your child's goals for the class?
- ___ 3. **Have you brainstormed** together about things your child can do to improve the relationship? Encourage your child to ask the teacher about strategies for learning the material.
- ___ 4. **Have you said** that you believe your child is a capable student who works hard and can be successful?
- ___ 5. **Will you encourage** your child to talk with the counselor if problems persist?

How well are you doing?

Each *yes* means you are helping your child learn how to constructively address issues with teachers. For each *no* answer, try that idea in the quiz.

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Practical Ideas for Parents
to Help Their Children.

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Outdoor activities can lower your child's stress and boost learning



The benefits of outdoor learning extend far beyond early childhood, when your child was probably fascinated by rocks and butterflies. Research shows that being outside is a natural stress reliever—and the wonders of nature can motivate kids to learn.

Here are a few outdoor learning activities for your child to try:

- **Go on a photo scavenger hunt.** Suggest that your child make a list of things to photograph. Examples might include a cumulus cloud, a spider web, a reflection in water and a tree's shadow.
- **Create a map** of a park or nature area. Include trails, streams, water crossings, fallen logs, etc.
- **Identify plants and animals** using a field guide or an app like Seek. Then, go outside at night to identify

planets, stars and constellations. Your child can use a star chart or an app such as Sky Map or Night Sky.

- **Write a poem inspired by nature.** To get started, have your child find a nice spot outdoors and sit quietly for 10 minutes. Your child can make a list of sights, sounds and scents, then use the list to write a poem.
- **Use the sun as a tool for science and engineering.** Encourage your child to research how to make a sundial with sidewalk chalk. Or have your child look up how to turn a pizza box into a solar oven!
- **Make art.** Encourage your child to create sun prints by arranging leaves on colored construction paper and leaving the project in the sun for a few hours. Your child can also squash berries to make paint.

Source: K. Weir, "Nurtured by Nature," *Monitor on Psychology*, American Psychological Association.

Help your child see mistakes on tests as learning opportunities



Most middle schoolers know that a test is an assessment of what they have learned. But many don't know that a test is also a *way* to learn.

To learn the most from tests, encourage your middle schooler to:

- **Jot down thoughts** about the test as soon as possible after taking it. Your child should answer questions such as, "What did I struggle with? What did I know best?"
- **Keep the test** if the teacher gives it back. Some teachers require students to correct their tests. If the teacher doesn't, your child should correct it anyway, and

save it to use as a study guide for midterms or finals.

- **Think about types of mistakes** your child made. Did your child make careless errors? That is a warning to pay closer attention when answering. Did the errors result from a lack of knowledge? Suggest that your child come up with ways to study more effectively next time—such as by taking notes on assigned readings or making a study guide. If your child doesn't understand a concept, watching a video explanation online could help.

Source: W.R. Luckie and W. Smethurst, *Study Power: Study Skills to Improve Your Learning & Your Grades*, Brookline Books.

Q: My middle schooler is hanging around some not-so-nice kids this year. I'm afraid my child will give into peer pressure and decide to be not-so-nice, too. What should I do?

Questions & Answers

A: Definitely talk to your child, but not necessarily about any one friend. Instead, have a conversation about friends in general. Ask your child questions such as:

- **What interests** do they share?
- **What does your child** enjoy about hanging out with them?
- **What values** do they share?
- **How does your child feel** when around them?

It could be that these friends make your child feel more mature. Or it could be that, like you, your child isn't really comfortable with the way they act, but doesn't really know what to do about it.

Beyond that first conversation, here's how to guide your middle schooler through this tricky area:

- **Avoid critical comments.** Belittling friends or insulting their upbringing, families, etc. may make your child feel the need to defend them.
- **Ask guiding questions.** "It sounds like Erin was pretty rude to the teacher today. How did that make you feel?" This kind of broad question may encourage your child to open up.
- **Support your child.** Understand that your child isn't weak when affected by peer pressure. These issues can be tricky, so say you will help your student figure them out.
- **Be firm.** If you have real misgivings about certain friends, then it's time to step in. Supervise the time your middle schooler spends with them.

It Matters: Schoolwork

Share effective study habits with your child



Students need strong study skills to be successful in middle school—and you can help your child develop them. The study skills your student learns now will help today, in high school and beyond.

To lay the groundwork for academic success:

- **Encourage your child** to break down large projects into smaller pieces. Middle schoolers often get rattled by long-term assignments. Smaller parts are less intimidating. Have your child set a deadline for each part.
- **Have your child estimate** how long an assignment will take and plan time accordingly. Then, have your child use a timer to see if estimates were accurate. This will help your student make adjustments for future assignments.
- **Increase self-awareness.** Recommend doing schoolwork when your child is most alert. If your child needs to let off some steam, encourage a run or a brisk walk before sitting down to work.
- **Create flexible learning spaces.** Allow working where your child is the most comfortable—whether that's at the kitchen table or on the couch. Just make sure that the space has adequate lighting and is free from distractions.
- **Promote organization.** Help your child create a system to keep track of important assignments. It might be a planner, an app or a desk calendar.

Help your middle schooler be prepared for learning

Middle schoolers are old enough to start taking responsibility for their learning. Here are three things students can do to make sure they're prepared for class:

1. **Show up.** Students won't learn the day's lesson if they aren't in class. Your child should only miss school for illness or emergency.
2. **Read ahead.** By skimming over the next day's lesson or chapter ahead of time, your child will be familiar with the topic. Reading ahead may also help your student ask better questions and participate more in class.
3. **Review class notes.** Even when there's no assignment in a certain class, your child should still look



over the day's notes at night. It's a quick, easy reminder of what's being taught.

Boost thinking skills to make study time more productive



In middle school, students must think deeply to work effectively. During study time, encourage your

child to:

- **Answer six key questions.** Your child should always ask: *who, what, when, where, why* and *how*. The answers will lead to a basic understanding of many reading assignments. They will also help your child write an outline.
- **Learn vocabulary.** Students struggle with assignments when they don't understand the language in it. Encourage your child to look up the definitions of unfamiliar words in the dictionary.
- **Weigh information.** Many assignments will require your child to understand the difference between central ideas and details. Practice this with your child: "John dropped tears on his blue shirt as he walked up to the house." What is more important, the fact that John had a blue shirt on or that he was crying?
- **Compare and contrast.** Can your child tell how things are alike and how they are different from one another? This skill will help with several subjects, particularly English and history. Ask, "How are a cat and a dog alike? How are they different?"