

# Middle School Parents<sup>®</sup>

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Family Engagement

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## Four strategies can boost your child's motivation to learn

Families and teachers know that students' attitudes can affect their learning. Students who believe that intelligence can grow over time tend to do better than those who think that people are just born smart or not.

So you'd think that praising your middle schooler's effort would help promote this attitude toward improvement. However, research reveals that in kids this age, focusing praise only on students' effort can backfire.

As students reach middle school, they often admire others who seem to succeed without much effort. So when they get praised only for their effort, they can feel put down.

Putting effort into learning improves results. But your child may be more receptive to the message if you also:

- 1. Reinforce the value of mistakes.** If your child earns a disappointing grade, brainstorm together about what went wrong—and what can be learned from it.
- 2. Emphasize progress.** Thinking about the progress made in a tough class can boost your child's self-confidence.
- 3. Help your child think** about the specific things that led to success. Encourage your child to try those things again.
- 4. Support positive friendships.** Being friends with other kids who want to do their best can give your child the motivation needed to succeed.

Source: J. Amemiya and M. Wang, "Why Effort Praise Can Backfire in Adolescence," *Child Development Perspectives*, Society for Research in Child Development.

## Maintain limits middle schoolers need to thrive



Middle schoolers are navigating a complex period of growth and development. While they may exhibit more

mature behaviors, it's important to remember that they still need guidance and support from the adults in their lives.

To maintain a healthy parent-child relationship:

- **Expect your child** to be respectful to you and other adults. Don't continue a conversation if your child is being rude. Walk away and agree to talk when your child is ready to speak respectfully.
- **Insist that your child** follow your rules. Middle schoolers don't need a long list of rules—just a few important ones that *must* be followed at home and elsewhere.
- **Don't try to be the "cool parent."** You should be kind and caring to your child's friends, but you are not "one of the gang." Children lose respect for adults who act like children.
- **Do not make decisions** based on what would please your middle schooler and friends. It's important to always trust yourself as the adult and make decisions accordingly.

# Show your middle schooler how to build time management skills



Self-management skills are essential for academic success. Learning to manage time, prioritize tasks and stay organized helps students do their best.

Self-management skills help students take responsibility for learning. They also lead to:

- **Better grades.**
- **Higher test scores.**
- **Increased likelihood of graduation.**
- **Stronger interpersonal skills.**
- **Higher self-esteem.**
- **Reduced chance of risky behavior.**

Time management is an example of one self-management skill that can be challenging for middle schoolers.

To make it easier:

- **Encourage your child** to make daily checklists of tasks that must be completed.

- **Teach your child** to use small amounts of spare time. Your child could study flash cards on the way to an appointment, or review a few math problems in the car.
- **Show your child** how to break down large assignments into smaller parts and schedule due dates for each part.
- **Look for time wasters.** In many homes, digital devices are terrible time thieves. By limiting passive recreational screen time, your middle schooler will have hours free for productive activities.

**“Time is the most valuable thing a man can spend.”**

—Theophrastus

# Keep communication flowing between you and your child



Remember that chatty elementary schooler you used to know? Well, that child has turned into a guarded preteen.

Suddenly, talking with your middle schooler feels like navigating a minefield. Ask one wrong question, and your child may explode or clam up.

To help keep the lines of communication open:

1. **Keep your questions brief.** To stay on top of what’s happening in school, avoid *yes-no* questions. Instead, ask open-ended ones: “What are you studying in science this week?”
2. **Be willing to listen.** Your child probably opens up occasionally. When that happens, it’s crucial that you be there to pay attention—and to *really* listen.
3. **Take your child seriously.** Even if your middle schooler’s problems seem minor to you, they are *major* to your child. Dismiss them, and your child will be even less likely to share next time.
4. **Offer alternatives.** Encourage your child to talk to another trusted adult if you aren’t available. Whether it’s a teacher, a relative or a friend’s parent, your child needs to talk about school and life with someone you both trust.
5. **Never give up.** These temperamental years won’t last forever, so hang in there. Stay optimistic, and keep being the reliable presence your child depends on.

# Are you helping your child handle academic issues?



For many students, one class offers more of a challenge than others.

Perhaps the teacher isn’t their favorite. Perhaps the subject is more complex. Whatever the issue, their grades begin to suffer.

If your middle schooler is struggling in a class, are you taking effective steps? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

- \_\_\_ 1. **Have you talked** with your child about the class? What does your child think the problem is?
- \_\_\_ 2. **Have you encouraged** your child to spend time studying for this class every day? Minds are like muscles that get stronger with practice.
- \_\_\_ 3. **Have you encouraged** your child to talk with the teacher to develop a plan for improvement?
- \_\_\_ 4. **Have you helped** your child explore resources for help?
- \_\_\_ 5. **Do you celebrate** every sign of your child’s progress?

**How well are you doing?**

More *yes* answers mean you are helping your middle schooler overcome struggles. For *no* answers, try those ideas in the quiz.

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# Share useful tips to help your child master reading material



In middle school, your child is required to read complex material. Fortunately, reading is a learned skill and, like

any other skill, it can be improved with practice.

To help your middle schooler do better with reading assignments:

- **Encourage reading for pleasure.** Frequent reading develops the ability to read smoothly and accurately. This is called *fluency*, and it is an important step toward reading comprehension.
- **Share active reading strategies.** Looking at the words on a page isn't enough for many students. They need to be focused and engaged with the content. Taking notes while reading

is the perfect activity to suggest. Just the act of taking notes often improves reading comprehension. It's even more effective if your middle schooler studies the notes after reading. Encourage your child to write a summary of the day's reading.

- **Focus on vocabulary.** One reason middle-school level texts and fictional works are challenging is that they introduce unfamiliar vocabulary. While reading, suggest your child to write down any unfamiliar words. After finishing each section or chapter, your child should look up the unknown words and write down their definitions.

Source: "Middle School Reading: Improving Your Seventh and Eighth Grader's Reading Comprehension," Math & Reading Help, American Library Association.

# Simple activities can reinforce your child's academic skills



Learning doesn't happen *only* during school. You can reinforce your middle schooler's academic skills any time! Here's how:

- **Have conversations** with your child about everything. Ask what your child thinks about a wide variety of topics.
- **Ask about** what your child is doing in classes. Say you are interested in your child's perspective on school.
- **Have your child teach you.** Pick a concept and ask your child to teach it to you. By explaining concepts to you, your child will gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter.
- **Let your child help you.** For example, the next time your phone starts giving you trouble, hand it over and see if your child can figure out a solution.
- **Help your child** engage in critical thinking. Discuss the similarities and differences between classes. Ask how your child would handle a particular problem.
- **Give your child** meaningful responsibilities. If you have a pet, have your child help with its care. Teach your child how to prepare simple meals, do laundry and other chores to help the family.
- **Expose your child to new things.** Every experience your child has, from a walk around the block to a trip to a store, impacts learning. Ask your child questions such as, "Does this remind you of anything you are learning in school?"

**Q:** My children just don't get along. They fight constantly and I always get caught in the middle. How can I teach them to treat each other respectfully and resolve their conflicts peacefully?

## Questions & Answers

**A:** You aren't alone! Even the friendliest of siblings have times when they don't get along—and many families feel like they have to act as referees.

Instead of getting in the middle of every squabble, teach your kids some basic strategies for resolving conflicts peacefully and respectfully. These strategies will also help them when they face conflicts at school.

Teach your children to:

- **Talk about problems** *before* they become conflicts. When little things are ignored, they tend to grow into big disputes.
- **Use "I-messages."** Encourage your children to talk about their feelings, not the other person's mistakes. Instead of, "YOU always steal my supplies," try, "I feel angry when you take something without asking to borrow it first."
- **Avoid the "blame game."** If there's a problem, it probably doesn't matter whose fault it is. Help your kids focus their attention on fixing the problem, not placing the blame.
- **Listen.** Your children will never understand another person's point of view if they don't listen to what that person has to say.
- **Cooperate and compromise.** If two people have a conflict, they each have a problem. To solve it, they'll probably both have to make some changes.



# It Matters: Study Skills

## Studying while listening to music hinders learning



Some students listen to music almost non-stop. But should your child listen while studying? One reading comprehension study says *no*.

Researchers in Cardiff, Wales set out to find answers to several questions: How does listening to music affect learning something new? Does it matter what type of music students listen to while studying? Would it make a difference if the music had lyrics?

Students were divided into groups. They were asked to learn new material under different conditions. Then, they took a test on what they had learned. The answers were clear and consistent. Students who studied in silence did much better. Their grades were up to 60 percent higher than those of students who listened to music.

Whether students heard pop, rap, hip hop or heavy metal made almost no difference. It's not the type of music—it's the act of listening. When students are listening, their brains don't focus efficiently on learning.

The students who studied in silence said they had fewer distractions. It was easier for them to concentrate on the task at hand.

There are times when listening to music can be helpful. It might relax your child before a test. But mastering new content is hard. It takes focus and attention. So to make the most of study time, make sure your child turns off the music.

**Source:** N. Perham and H. Currie, "Does listening to preferred music improve reading comprehension performance?" *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## Preparation is the key for test success in middle school

**M**any middle schoolers suffer from test anxiety. Fortunately, the cure for most test anxiety is simple: Preparation. When teachers announce an upcoming test, encourage your child to:

- **Find out the purpose** for the test. What does a high score—or a low one—mean for your child? Is the test multiple-choice? True or false? The more students know what to expect, the more relaxed and confident they may feel.
- **Ask the teacher** about the best ways to prepare. Are there practice tests your child can take? Websites to visit? Would reviewing certain textbook chapters help?
- **Remain calm.** Discuss the studying your child has already done. Then, provide perspective: One test grade won't change your student's entire future.



- **Focus on physical well-being.** Insist that your child get plenty of sleep the night before test day. Offer a healthy breakfast in the morning, and remind your child to dress comfortably in layers.

**Source:** J.S. Schumm, Ph.D., *How to Help Your Child with Homework: The Complete Guide to Encouraging Good Study Habits and Ending the Homework Wars*, Free Spirit Publishing.

## Five test-taking strategies help students improve scores



The next time a standardized test looms, share these test-taking strategies with your middle schooler:

1. **Answer easiest questions** first—if the test format allows it. After getting past those, your child can go back and focus on the tricky ones.
2. **Read the entire question.** If the test is being timed, your child may be tempted to race through each questions. Remind your child to slow down and read them carefully.
3. **Pick out key words in questions.** Your child should note words like *including*, *except* and *compare*. They help define what's being asked.
4. **Consider each available answer.** Even if your child feels certain that the first answer is correct, suggest reading through the rest. It's possible that another answer is stronger.
5. **Make an informed guess.** Your child should eliminate answers that are obviously wrong and then choose from the remaining options.