

# Middle School Parents<sup>®</sup>

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## Daily conversations sharpen higher-order thinking skills

**W**hat kind of thinker is your middle schooler? Can your child tackle a tricky assignment in a clever way? Does your child weigh all sides of an issue before picking a position? Will your child give a reasoned opinion about something when asked?

If the answers are *no, no* and *no*, don't worry! Like other skills, your child's thinking skills can be sharpened over time. To foster deeper thinking:

- **Engage in conversation.** Don't gloss over the issues of the day when sitting down to dinner. Really discuss them. Ask questions about the things your child has seen online or heard on the news. It may prompt your child to consider those topics more deeply.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** When possible, avoid asking your child questions that can be answered with a simple *yes* or *no*. Instead, ask questions that are more likely to lead to a thoughtful response. "What has your science teacher said about the climate?" may result in a more detailed answer than, "Did you talk about anything interesting in science class today?"
- **Read a news article** to your child or watch the news together. Then, ask for your child's opinion about specific topics in it.
- **Avoid quizzing.** Boosting your middle schooler's analytical thinking skills shouldn't seem like school. Keep your exchanges casual and friendly.

## Boost academic achievement with exercise



Stress has a negative effect on student achievement. That means that no matter how much students

have prepared, if they are stressed-out, they are not fully ready to learn.

One effective way to help your middle schooler decrease stress is to promote daily physical activity. Here's why. Exercise:

- **Helps students feel happier.** The endorphins exercise releases also increase energy levels.
- **Is calming.** When kids are focused on the exercise or sport at hand, they are likely to stop focusing on their worries.
- **Improves memory.** Studies have shown that the increased blood flow to the brain caused by exercise can help students remember more.
- **Increases self-confidence.** When students feel like they have more control over their bodies, they may feel more in control of their studies as well.

No time to exercise? Try to make schedule changes so your child can fit some activity into the day.

Source: "Exercise and stress: Get moving to manage stress," Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research.

# Help your middle schooler bounce back from low grades



It's natural to be upset if your child brings home a low grade. But showing your frustration and anger won't result in better grades. Instead:

- **Put grades into perspective.** Let your middle schooler know that grades are important, but that they are *not* a measure of a person's worth or learning potential.
- **Focus on the positive.** Talk about what your child has done well—in an academic subject or another activity. Ask, "What are you most proud of?"
- **Look for possible causes.** Low grades indicate a problem. Ask what your child thinks the problem is. Sometimes it's not academic ability, but poor study habits or test anxiety.

- **Set realistic goals** for improvement. Don't expect all A's if your middle schooler is currently getting all C's. And be specific about the steps your child needs to take in order to meet goals.
- **Contact teachers.** Sometimes students try their best and still fail. Or, they blame teachers for their troubles. Gather more information by asking your child's teachers for their opinion about what's happening.

**"Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts."**

—Winston Churchill

# Start talking to your child about the transition to high school



A big transition is ahead for many middle school students and their families. High school is a mere four months

away! It's normal for you and your child to be a bit nervous. Most middle schoolers:

- **Feel excitement** about the opportunities high school offers. These include new friendships and more freedom. High school also lets students pursue new interests through a broader range of classes.
- **Are a bit anxious.** High school standards for academics, behavior and independence exceed what most middle schoolers are used to. There will likely be more students, too. To ease your child's anxiety:
- **Tap available resources.** Encourage your child to talk to the school counselor about the transition. Your middle schooler should also talk to neighbors or friends who are already in high school and ask about their experiences. Be sure to attend orientation sessions offered by the high school.
- **Talk to your child.** Share some of your own positive high school memories. Discuss the classes your child wants to take and the extracurricular activities that seem interesting.
- **Offer encouragement.** Starting high school is a huge milestone. Say that you are proud of your child and are looking forward to this new and exciting stage.

# Are you still emphasizing attendance?



Student attendance is linked to academic achievement. For middle schoolers to stay on track, they need to attend all of their classes, every day.

Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to see if you are doing all you can to promote regular, on-time class attendance:

- \_\_\_ **1. Have you made it clear** that attending school is your child's first priority through the end of the year?
- \_\_\_ **2. Do you avoid** letting your child miss a class unless there is a sickness or an emergency?
- \_\_\_ **3. Do you emphasize** to your child that your family does not tolerate skipping classes?
- \_\_\_ **4. Do you encourage** your child to take steps to be on time, like using an alarm clock?
- \_\_\_ **5. Do you work with** the school to make sure you are alerted if your child is not in a class?

**How well are you doing?**

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are conveying the importance of attendance to your child. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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# Teach your middle schooler to make decisions in five steps



Decision-making can be a tough process for middle schoolers. However, there are few skills more important in school and in life than learning to make wise decisions.

Teach your child to follow these five steps:

1. **Get the facts.** Let's say your child has been asked to look after a neighbor's dog for the weekend. First, your child should find out exactly what is involved. For example, how often does the dog need to be fed and walked? At what times?
2. **Anticipate conflicts.** Your child has to study this weekend, but has also been invited to go to a friend's soccer tournament. Can your child do both and still care for the dog?
3. **Consider the consequences** of each choice. If your child skips the tournament, will the friend be upset? If your child turns down the job, will the neighbor ask another person to care for the dog in the future?
4. **Come up with alternatives.** Perhaps your child can explain to the friend that caring for the neighbor's dog could lead to future dog-sitting jobs. Could your child go to a different soccer game?
5. **Accept that decisions** may have downsides. If the decision is to miss the tournament, your child is giving up time supporting a friend. But your child is gaining a chance to look after the dog when the neighbor travels. Sometimes good decisions require a small sacrifice to achieve a long-term benefit.

# Self-respect contributes to your middle schooler's school success



Self-respect is essential for students. It fosters a positive attitude and a feeling of competence.

When students respect themselves, they are more likely to set realistic goals, persevere through challenges and give their best effort.

Self-respect is also a factor in better decision-making and the ability to prioritize schoolwork and other commitments.

To instill a sense of self-respect in your middle schooler:

- **Model a positive attitude.** Everyone experiences bumps in the road. These are temporary. Encourage your child to make a fresh start after a setback.

- **Help your child resist** negative peer pressure. Talk about ways to avoid situations your child knows are not right.
- **Point out your child's strengths** and explain that people have different strengths and weaknesses. This awareness can help your middle schooler control feelings of jealousy. The ability to be happy for others, rather than jealous of them, is an important part of self-respect.
- **Take a firm stance** against substance abuse. Tell your child that self-respect includes respect for personal safety and health.

Source: Sean Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, Fireside.

**Q:** My middle schooler does not like to write. When there is a writing assignment, my child just stares into space and can't get started. Is there anything I can do to help?

## Questions & Answers

**A:** Some middle schoolers are reluctant writers. Many simply freeze with fear at the thought of writing. They worry that what they write won't be any good, or that they'll be made fun of.

To help your middle school student overcome writer's block:

- **Empathize with your child.** Say that professional writers have difficulty writing sometimes, too—and that's OK.
- **Recommend practice.** Have your child write about anything that comes to mind, no matter how silly. Or, suggest writing about a personal interest.
- **Talk through topic ideas** with your child. Encourage brainstorming, and ask your child to make a list of ideas.
- **Suggest your child write** down ideas just as they come. Later your child can edit for flow, grammar and spelling.
- **Be gentle when reviewing** your middle schooler's writing. Note what you like first and don't over-criticize. Focus on what your child is trying to say and not just the mechanics of writing.
- **Avoid fixing mistakes.** This will damage your student's confidence and send the message that you don't think your child is capable of fixing them independently.
- **Be patient.** Allow your child to express frustration. It takes time and practice to become a good writer.

# It Matters: Discipline

## Harsh discipline can hurt rather than motivate



Researchers have found that some kinds of family discipline can backfire. They followed more than a thousand students over nine years and learned that when adults practiced harsh discipline, such as hitting or using verbal or physical threats, their children turned away from the family.

As a result, these kids relied more on their peers for support. They chose to spend time with their friends instead of doing their homework. They wanted to keep their friends so badly that they would break rules to stay in the group. If their friends tried risky things like drugs or alcohol, they did as well. Girls were more likely to become sexually active. Boys were more likely to break the law.

The results were predictable: These students were not successful in middle and high school. Many dropped out of school completely.

Discipline works best when it is firm, fair and consistent. To discipline your child in a positive and effective way:

- **Establish a set of rules** and the consequences for breaking them. Discuss these with your child.
- **Remain calm** if your child breaks a rule. Just follow through with the established consequence.
- **Reward good behavior** with trust. Say, “I trust you to make the right decision on this. I am here if you want to talk about it.”

**Source:** Society for Research in Child Development, “Harsh parenting predicts low educational attainment through increasing peer problems,” *ScienceDaily*.

## Be specific and involve your child when setting limits

It isn't always easy to get middle schoolers to follow the rules. After all, it's normal for them to test limits and angle for more freedom.

Experts recommend following these guidelines when setting limits:

- **Spell them out.** Never assume your child knows what's allowed and what's not allowed. Say exactly what you expect. “You must charge your phone outside of your bedroom at night. No exceptions.”
- **Explain why you set the rules** you do. You don't need to justify your rules, but do help your child understand them. “You can't have the phone in your room after bedtime because it cuts into your sleep.”
- **Get your child's input.** If you're thinking of modifying a rule, talk to your child. “We are considering changing your technology curfew.”



What time do you think is reasonable?” You may not follow your child's suggestion, but listen.

- **Back off.** Once the rules are set, trust that your child will obey them. If your child doesn't, enforce reasonable consequences.

## Model the respectful behavior you'd like to see from your child



When it comes to teaching your child about respect, the idea isn't to *teach* at all. It's to *show*. By demonstrating what respect looks like, you'll go a long way toward helping your child become respectful.

Here are some simple ways to demonstrate respect every day:

- **Be honest.** Tell the truth. Admit mistakes—don't blame others for them. Apologize (even to your child) when you are wrong.
- **Be dependable.** If you tell your child you'll do something, do it.

Earn respect by proving that you're reliable. And when you can't do something, be honest about it. It's an easy way to demonstrate respect.

- **Be kind.** Don't insult or belittle your child after mistakes.
- **Be fair.** Don't pass judgment or punish your child for something before learning all the facts. Show respect by taking the time to get all sides of the story.
- **Be polite.** Say *please*, *thank you* and *excuse me* when talking to your child. Don't barge into a closed room, either. Instead, knock.