

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



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Cope Middle School
Judy Grooms, Principal

Reading all summer will help your child start next year strong

Educators know that the more students read, the more literacy skills and background knowledge they bring to their studies. That's why regular summer reading is so important for empowering academic success. But it isn't always easy to convince middle schoolers to read when school is out. Here are some strategies to try:



- **Challenge your child.** If his teacher hands out a summer reading list, offer an incentive: For every extra book he reads beyond what's required, your middle schooler can earn a special treat from you.
- **Encourage your child** to start a summer reading club with friends or classmates (in-person or online, as appropriate). Members can choose a book to read and discuss, or share their reactions to whatever they are reading. A social element may help sustain your child's interest in reading.
- **Suggest books that** other kids are reading. Book series by authors such as Margaret Peterson Haddix and Rick Riordan are popular among middle schoolers. Ask a librarian what kids in your area are reading, or check *Goodreads.com* for lists and reviews of popular books.
- **Set an example.** Let your middle schooler see you choosing to read rather than watch a movie or play on your phone. Share interesting things you read with him.



Create structure for summer safety

Students may be eagerly anticipating a summer of freedom, but school-free days require more oversight from parents—and that's especially true this year. To support safety even as conditions change, put a structure in place:

- **Establish rules** with your child from the start. They should cover exactly where she is allowed to go and when. Be clear that any exceptions need to be approved by you in advance. Discuss the need to continue to practice healthy precautions, such as handwashing and avoiding close contact.
- **Establish consequences** for breaking the rules—before your child is even tempted. Choose consequences that relate to the misbehavior.
- **Plan ways to keep** your child busy and active. Choose activities with safety in mind. Enroll her in an online summer learning program. Suggest that she start her own business walking dogs or mowing lawns. Encourage her to pursue a new hobby.

School is not over yet!

To help your child stay focused and do her best through the last day of school:

- **Maintain** routines for schoolwork and bedtime.
- **Insist** that your child show up for every class.
- **Have** her set a learning goal for the rest of the year.
- **Continue** to monitor her assignments and progress.



Enrich time with your child

Parents and children spend a lot of their time talking about who needs to do what. To make more of your time together:

- **Ask your child's opinion** about what is going on locally and in the world.
- **Hold family meetings** to solve problems and share ideas.
- **Participate in family traditions**, or make new ones.

Ask leading questions

When your child is struggling with an assignment, think of yourself as a guide, rather than a source of answers. Lead him through by asking questions such as:

- **Which specific question** are you on? Concentrating on one task at a time can keep him from feeling overwhelmed.
- **What do the instructions say?** Have him read them out loud to you. He may have missed key words the first time.
- **Are there things** you've learned before that may help you here?



If he is still stuck, have your child turn in as much of the work as he is able to do. Then encourage him to ask the teacher for help.



My middle schooler is losing her focus. How can I help?

Q: My sixth grader is getting moodier and more scattered by the day—and it shows in her schoolwork. I'm worried about how she'll cope in seventh grade. What should I do?

A: This unusual year has affected students in ways we are just beginning to understand. But it's also possible that your child is simply experiencing feelings many kids have as they move from childhood into adolescence. Physical, emotional and academic changes can make anyone moody and scattered.

To help your child weather these changes:

- **Provide a calm, steady example.** Your child probably speaks like an adult one minute and fusses like a toddler the next. The more you can avoid getting angry or upset in the face of her mood swings, the better.
- **Maintain expectations** and hold your child accountable. It's normal for middle schoolers to test limits, but that doesn't excuse misbehavior. Assignments still have to be turned in. Actions still have consequences. If your child chooses to break a rule, enforce the consequences—every time.
- **Allow for change.** Just because your child used to love math or the clarinet doesn't mean she always will. Encourage her to tell you what matters to her now. Let her know you are excited that she is growing up. And if things don't improve, consult her doctor or counselor for help.



Avoid distracted learning

Does your child play videos on one screen while doing an assignment on another? Do texts from friends pop up in the middle of her English paper? Kids call this multitasking, but researchers have another name for it: distracted learning. It interferes with attention, comprehension and recall—and lowers grades. To discourage it:

- **Teach your child** that her choices affect her results—and she is in control.
- **Suggest that she put** all devices other than the one she needs for her assignment in another room.
- **Let her alternate** half-hour periods of concentrated effort with five minute breaks for “fun media” or exercise.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, “Distracted learning a big problem, golden opportunity for educators, students,” ScienceDaily, niswc.com/distracted.

Strengthen communication

You'll get more information from a child who doesn't say much if you keep your questions short and open-ended—“What feels challenging this week?” Keep in mind that your child's problems may seem minor to you, but they are *major* to him. Take him seriously, and be the reliable presence he can lean on.



Parent Quiz

Are you ready for what comes next?

The middle school years go by quickly, and your child will be in high school before you know it. Are you helping him prepare for the next level of his education? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

1. **Do you help** your child develop organization skills, such as using a planner to track his assignments?
2. **Do you work** with him on building study habits, such as reviewing class notes daily?
3. **Do you discuss** the importance of taking schoolwork seriously?
4. **Do you listen** when your child talks and offer guidance and support?
5. **Do you teach** your child how to avoid inappropriate

and unsafe activities, even if friends are participating?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are laying a solid foundation for your child to build on. For each no, try that idea.

“Children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for the future.”

—John F. Kennedy

Give your child a journal

Middle schoolers are becoming more advanced thinkers. Inspire your child to practice by urging her to record her thoughts in a journal. Suggest that she write about:

- **Things that make her laugh.** What makes them funny?
- **Her ideal day.** How would it be the same as/different from her typical day?
- **Her favorite things.** Later she'll enjoy seeing how her opinions have changed.

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