

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

MIDDLE SCHOOL



January 2023

Help your child reboot school habits and motivation

By January, the good intentions many middle schoolers started off with in September may have gone a bit off track. Procrastination, carelessness and other poor work habits sometimes set in.

A new calendar year is the perfect time for a “reboot.” For a strong second half of the year, help your student make some school-related resolutions—and then stick to them.

Your middle schooler might resolve to:

- **Be more organized.** Help your child use tools like a calendar, sticky notes, to-do lists and an assignment notebook to keep track of schoolwork and schedules. Set a regular weekly time for tidying and organizing schoolwork and papers.
- **Try “single-tasking.”** Another name for multitasking while doing assignments is “distracted learning.” Have your child turn off all devices that aren’t necessary for the assignment and focus on one thing at a time.
- **Stick to a schedule.** Help your child reestablish a regular routine that allows enough time to complete assignments and study. Plan other times when your student can text friends, listen to music or just goof around.
- **Aim for a new goal.** Help your child figure out what it will take to reach it. Clearly defining the steps makes it easier for kids to make the choices that will help them achieve their goals.



Boost thinking skills with conversation

Can your middle schooler give a reasoned opinion about something when asked? Weigh all sides of an issue before picking a position? You can help your child strengthen these critical thinking skills simply by talking together.

To use conversations to provide critical thinking practice:

- **Talk about current events** in the news or at school. Instead of just mentioning something, really discuss it. Encourage your child to ask questions and consider topics more deeply.
- **Share articles** or watch educational shows with your child.

Then ask for your child’s opinion about specific topics in them.

- **Ask thinking questions** that can’t be answered with one word. “What have you learned that has changed how you think about something?”
- Try to keep your conversations casual and friendly. They should feel like talking, not taking a test.

Build student responsibility

Taking responsibility for learning in three daily ways will help your child achieve in school. Encourage your student to:

1. **Attend every class.**
2. **Read ahead.** Skimming the next lesson ahead of time may help your child ask better questions and participate more.
3. **Review class notes** for a reminder of the important points in the day’s lesson.

Set expectations that fit

Most of the information on what children “should” be doing at a particular age is based on averages. But your child is unique. So rather than setting a goal because “sixth graders do this,” establish expectations that reflect who your child really is.



Students are motivated by goals that are both challenging *and* realistic. Ask teachers for help identifying some for your child.

Talk in advance about ways to improve writing

If your child resists your suggestions for improving written work, try offering guidance *before* your student starts writing. Urge your child to focus on key areas such as:



- **Content.** The topic should be clear, the ideas should be thought through and examples should be relevant.
- **Organization.** There should be a beginning, middle and end. Ideas should flow logically and be supported by details.
- **Word choice.** Words should add meaning. Your child should avoid using extra words just to take up space.



How should I respond to my middle schooler's mood?

Q: My eighth grader mopes around a lot and seems very unhappy. How can I tell if my child is just sad, or if this is depression?

A: Middle schoolers are known for their mood swings. However, rates of mental health issues among adolescents are on the rise, so you are wise to consider depression. Kids with a depressed parent are at greater risk for this illness. So are kids who are under stress, have a learning disorder, or experience a loss.

Depression is a possibility if one or more of these signs persists for at least a few weeks:

- **Frequent sadness**, anger or irritability.
- **Feelings of worthlessness** or guilt.
- **Lack of energy**.
- **Change in appetite** or weight.
- **Difficulty concentrating**.
- **Frequent headaches** or stomachaches.
- **Difficulty sleeping**, or oversleeping.
- **Loss of interest** in school or activities.
- **Preoccupation with death** or suicide.



If you suspect your child is depressed, don't hesitate to seek professional help from a doctor or school counselor. If treatment is delayed, the situation could worsen. Also, tell your child that you are available to discuss anything. Listen respectfully and make it clear that you want to help.



Are you discussing responsible romance?

Whether your child is interested in romantic interactions yet or not, it's time to start talking about them together. Are you providing the guidance that will help your child navigate these tricky waters? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

- ___ **1. Do you talk** about the importance of self-respect, respect for the other person, kindness and consideration?
- ___ **2. Do you approach** the topic calmly? Many middle school relationships are more about friendship than getting serious.
- ___ **3. Do you establish** rules about social activities and remind your child that school comes first?
- ___ **4. Do you show** respect for your child's feelings?

- ___ **5. Do you talk** about the consequences of risky behavior?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are helping your child learn to handle romance responsibly. For each no, try that idea from the quiz.

"First love is only a little foolishness and a lot of curiosity."

—George Bernard Shaw

Encourage active studying

Simply staring at a page in a book isn't studying. Students learn by actively engaging with the material. Encourage your child to:

- **Ask six questions.** Figuring out *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why* and *how* leads to a basic understanding of many texts.
- **Look up unfamiliar words** and write down their definitions.
- **Compare and contrast**, by thinking about how one topic is alike or different from another.

Speak up for languages

Your child will get more than travel skills out of learn-



ing a foreign language. Research shows that foreign language study enhances students' memory skills and understanding of their first language. It also strengthens their:

- **Problem-solving skills**, and awareness of their ability to do challenging things.
- **Ability to get a job.**
- **Understanding of the world.**

Source: "What Does Research Show About the Benefits of Language Learning," ACIFL.

Make rules to address the way your child thinks

Middle schoolers generally live in the moment. Your student may not grasp that failing to study for a math test tonight could result in a lower math grade for the semester. To your child, the semester's end seems light-years away, unconnected to today's actions.

To prevent problems in this developmental stage, set firm rules about schoolwork and studying and stick to them.

Source: K.R. Ginsburg with M.M. Jablow, "But I'm Almost 13!" *An Action Plan for Raising a Responsible Adolescent*, Contemporary Books.

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