

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

MIDDLE SCHOOL



January 2025

Help your middle schooler learn and use lots of new words

Having a wide knowledge of words and their meanings will give your child an advantage in reading and writing. It's easier to comprehend the meaning of a text when the words are familiar. And your child will be able to choose just the right words to express ideas clearly in writing.

To help expand your child's vocabulary:

- **Encourage daily reading.** Frequent reading is one of the best ways for students to learn new words. If your child loves cooking, suggest a biography of a famous chef. Look for more books by authors your child likes. Every so often, have your middle schooler read something that seems a little bit challenging.
- **Stop and look words up.** Whenever you and your child hear a new word, look up its definition in the dictionary. Have your student do this when reading, too.
- **Promote practice.** Encourage your child to use new words in conversation with you and others. Repeatedly recalling and using a word reinforces it in your child's mind.
- **Include your child in conversations** with adults. When children talk with adults, they are often exposed to new words. Ask your middle schooler's opinion on a topic. Then, be sure to avoid speaking for your child.



Know your maturing child

Understanding the emotional changes kids go through in the middle school years will help you support your child. These include:

- **A growing need** for independence.
- **A desire to be respected** for being more grown up.
- **Waves of self-doubt.**

Give your child meaningful responsibilities and chances to make decisions. Praise progress and success. Your love and support mean a lot—even if your child doesn't admit it.

Plan ahead for test success

A little planning can make preparing for tests more effective. Before a test, have your child ask and answer these questions:

- **How well do I** know each topic? Do I need time to learn as well as review?
- **What strategies** will I use to study (self-tests, flash cards, etc.)?



Then, help your child create a schedule of specific times to do the needed work.

Teach your child phone self-control

According to research, about half of children in the United States get a phone by the age of 11—and most turn to them between 26 and 100 times a day. This direct access makes managing digital media use a challenge for families.

Since too much of the wrong kinds of screen activity is linked with negative effects on learning and well-being, it's vital to help your child learn to keep screen use under control. Have your middle schooler:

- **Keep a log** of all phone use for one day. How many times did your child pick up the phone? For what activities? For how long?
- **Think about ways** to reduce phone use the next day. Your child could turn off notifications and check the phone only during specific times, for example.
- **Obey tech-free times**—while doing schoolwork, during meals and in the hour before bedtime.

Source: "Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use," Common Sense.

Foster problem-solving

When a problem crops up that your child is not sure how to handle, build problem-solving skills by sharing this method:

1. **Define the issue.** What are the facts?
2. **Get more information** if necessary.
3. **Write down** as many potential solutions as possible.
4. **List the pros and cons** that could result from each option.
5. **Decide what to do** and do it.
6. **Review.** Did the solution work? If not, go back to step 4.





What should I do to help my child turn grades around?

Q: In the first half of the school year, my seventh grader earned lower grades than we both would have liked. How can I help my child recover from a rough start?

A: There are months still to come in the school year—plenty of time for your child to finish strong. Encourage your middle schooler to consider this a fresh start.

To support improvement, help your child commit to these positive habits:

- **Goal-setting.** Help your child set reasonable, attainable goals. It's unrealistic to expect top grades overnight. But if your child earned all C's last grading period, a goal could be bringing at least some up to B's this time.
- **A daily study time.** When is your student most alert? Right after school? Or after a little downtime? Make that study time, and stick to it. If there are no assignments due the next day, your child can read or review.
- **Getting enough sleep.** Studies show that sleepy students don't perform well in school, so insist that your child head to bed (without digital devices) at a reasonable hour.
- **Tracking progress.** Discuss what your child is learning and how it's going regularly. Monitor online class gradebooks together. If your child is struggling, recommend asking for help as soon as possible.



Are you encouraging careful work?

Sometimes, students earn poor grades on schoolwork even when they know the material. The reason is usually careless errors. Are you teaching your child the importance of working carefully? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

___ **1. Do you remind** your child to use all the time available when taking tests?

___ **2. Do you suggest** rereading instructions and rubrics so your child can be sure to do what is being asked?

___ **3. Do you encourage** your child to double-check answers before submitting work?

___ **4. Do you discuss** the need to pay attention to details, such as putting your child's name on work to be turned in?

___ **5. Do you reinforce** the idea that neatness counts, both at home and at school?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are teaching your child to put effort into being thorough. For each no, try that idea.

"Attention to detail is not about perfection. It's about excellence, about constant improvement."

—Chris Denny

Keep fear from getting in your middle schooler's way

After experiencing a few failures in a row, students sometimes avoid trying new or challenging things. The fear of failing again holds them back. To prevent this from happening if your child is struggling:

- **Encourage a positive outlook.** When students believe success is possible and decide to give a task their best effort, they are more likely to succeed.
- **Recommend trying** different study strategies. Suggest starting with an easy task to build confidence before moving on to a harder one. Or, your child could make pictures and graphs to figure out or remember a process. Does reading a passage aloud make it easier to understand?

Fit in some time for fitness

Exercise gives children more control over their bodies—and that sense of control can carry over to their studies, too. In a study of 11-year olds, regular physical activity was found to have a positive effect on academic achievement, because it helped students manage their behavior to achieve goals. Make exercise a part of your child's daily routine. You could even plan to work out together!



Source: F. Vasilopoulos and M.R. Ellefson, "Investigation of the associations between physical activity, self-regulation and educational outcomes in childhood," *PLOS ONE*.

Choose words carefully

The way you talk about your child can be motivating—or discouraging. If you could possibly be overheard, avoid making negative comments about your child to others—especially family members. Instead, talk about your student's kindness or sense of responsibility, or the time your child didn't give up, even when the going got tough.

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