

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

MIDDLE SCHOOL



September 2022

Team up from the start to make this a great year for your child

A new school year is a fresh start. That's welcome news for students whose learning has been affected by the pandemic. And there are lots of ways you can help ensure that your child starts—and continues—the year strong.

Middle school is demanding, and most students, even those who do well, will sometimes need a little boost. If this happens to your child, know that one person alone may not be able to “fix” the issue. But a joint effort between you, the school and your child can get your student back on track.

To support your middle schooler this year:

- **Encourage your child** to ask for help at school. Teachers want to help students master material and they have lots of effective strategies.
- **Stay positive** when talking to your child about schoolwork. Focus on solving problems, not on placing blame on your child or the teachers.
- **Remember that teachers** want your child to succeed. If a challenge arises, contact the teacher and ask how you can work together to help your student overcome it.
- **Help your child** strengthen school skills at home. That can mean reviewing math or history facts. But also work on qualities that help students be more effective in class, such as listening and thinking decisions through.



Explain the purpose of education

Research shows that middle schoolers are more likely to succeed in school when their families help them understand that doing well is about more than getting good grades. It's about reaching their future goals.

Kids this age want more independence, but guidance from you still makes a difference. In fact, “lack of guidance” is a top reason capable students don't go on to college.

A long-term study of data from thousands of students also found that by middle school:

- **Kids begin losing interest** in grades. Help your child set learning goals and celebrate progress.

- **Building parent-teacher** relationships can be challenging. If you can't meet in person, emails and phone calls can help you stay in touch.
- **Family engagement matters.** Stress the long-term benefits of education with your child.

Source: N.E. Hill and D.F. Tyson, “Parental Involvement in Middle School: A Meta-Analytic Assessment of the Strategies That Promote Achievement,” *Developmental Psychology*.

Teach conduct by example

When it comes to teaching behavior, showing is more effective than telling. So model “good student” conduct for your child. Do what you say you will. Admit your mistakes and never belittle others for theirs. And be sure to take time to listen and understand your child's side when you disagree.



Sleep is vital homework

Lack of sleep affects students' ability to concentrate and remember. Studies show six out of 10 middle schoolers don't get enough. To make sure your child does:

- **Stick to a regular bedtime** (even on weekends) that allows nine hours of sleep.
- **Set a screen-time curfew**—devices go off at least 30 minutes before bedtime.
- **Suggest a short nap** in the afternoon. Limit it to 10 to 20 minutes.

Source: “Sleep in Middle and High School Students,” CDC Healthy Schools.

Foster positive study habits

Establishing strong study habits now will help your student achieve throughout school. Help your child learn to:

- **Get organized.** Show your student how to use a calendar or planner to keep track of assignments and test dates.
- **Divide big projects** into smaller, more manageable parts.
- **Estimate time** needed to accomplish tasks. Have your child guess how long a task will take, then time it. This will help your student plan future study time effectively.
- **Be self-aware.** When is your child most alert? Encourage your student to do homework and studying in those times.





My child rejects my interest and advice. What can I do?

Q: My eighth grader and I used to be really close. But all I hear from my child these days is "Leave me alone!" How can I stay connected and involved in my middle schooler's life?

A: It has been years since life—in school and out—was truly "normal" for most kids. That is a major chunk of life for a middle schooler, at a time when kids are also going through physical changes and emotional upheaval. All that stress and anxiety can affect relationships. It may seem challenging to stay involved in your child's life, but the important thing is to try. Your connection supports your child's school success and well-being.

To navigate this tricky time:

- **Expect some resistance.** Your child will be irritated by some of what you say or do—no matter how you say or do it. Try not to take it personally. Instead, set guidelines for respectful behavior.
- **Maintain perspective.** If your middle schooler didn't care about you or your opinions, you would probably not get such a strong reaction.
- **Listen more than you talk.** Show interest, but don't ask constant questions or give unwanted advice. If you are quiet, your child may talk.
- **Seek help if your child's behavior** seems unusual. A doctor can evaluate signs of depression or other medical conditions.



Are you emphasizing academic honesty?

Students cheat in school for lots of reasons. Some may not understand what academic honesty is. Others believe that it doesn't really matter. Are you teaching your child why honesty in school is vital? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

1. **Do you discuss** cheating with your child, and say that it is *always* wrong?
2. **Do you talk** about different forms of cheating, such as using apps to solve homework problems and sharing test questions with other students?
3. **Do you explain** that copying online material without giving credit to the source is also cheating?
4. **Do you discuss** cheating's consequences (failure on the work, or even in the class)?

5. **Do you set** a positive example by being honest yourself?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are making it clear that being honest in school is important. For each no, try that idea.

"Integrity is doing the right thing, even when no one is watching."
—C.S. Lewis

Share social media smarts

Social media has become a go-to source for news—even for middle schoolers. But it is full of misinformation. So it's important that students learn to evaluate what they see, and not just accept it. Teach your child to ask questions like:

- **Who wrote or posted this?** Is the source credible? A person may have an official sounding title that's totally fake.
- **Are the ideas one-sided** or extreme? The post may be designed to persuade rather than inform.
- **Is the same information** available elsewhere from credible sources?

Source: A. Weinberg, "Helping Students Find the Truth in Social Media," Edutopia, George Lucas Educational Foundation.

Tests don't have to be scary

If the thought of a test gives your child the shivers, these preparation strategies can help ease the anxiety. Encourage your child to:

- **Get clarification.** Few things are scarier than the unknown. Have your child ask the teacher about what the test will cover.
- **Get a head start.** Studying in several short sessions over several days is more effective than cramming the night before. Your child will also have time to get help if necessary before the test.

Try three ways to motivate

Motivating middle schoolers isn't always easy. To encourage your child to do what needs to be done:



1. **Discuss it before** your student ever turns on a screen.
2. **Make it routine.** Set a regular homework time, for example.
3. **Support your child's** interests. Showing enthusiasm for something your student enjoys working on may inspire similar effort in other areas.

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