

December 2024  
Vol. 28, No. 4

# Middle School Parents

*still make the difference!*



## Dropout prevention begins with middle school habits

**M**any students who drop out of school between ninth and twelfth grade started down that path in sixth, seventh or eighth grade. Studies show that, without intervention, sixth graders are 75 percent more likely to drop out before graduation if they:

- **Miss class** 20 percent or more of the time.
- **Fail math or English.**
- **Earn poor grades** in a core course due to behavior issues.

The good news is that families can steer middle schoolers down the right path. Here's how:

- **Expect your child** to attend school every single day. Students should miss school only if they are sick or there is a family emergency.

- **Talk about school** and what your child is learning each day. Say that education is important to your family and you expect your child to work hard.
- **Emphasize that you believe** in your child's ability to learn and be successful in school.
- **Encourage your child** to become involved in extracurricular activities. Students with ties to school beyond academics are more likely to stay in school.
- **Work with teachers.** Tell your child that you and the teachers are all on the same team and want the best for your middle schooler.

Source: A. O'Brien, "Middle School Moment," *Frontline*, WGBH Educational Foundation.

## Foster your middle schooler's independence



Middle schoolers don't morph into responsible young adults overnight. But they may not turn

into them at all if adults always do everything for them.

Students in the middle grades are generally capable of taking responsibility for:

- **Making lunches.** Show your child how to pack a healthy lunch. Lay down some basic rules about what's OK—or not OK—to pack. Insist that your middle schooler prepare lunch the night before.
- **Waking up on time.** Have your middle schooler set an alarm clock to wake up to. Act as the "backup alarm" until your middle schooler gets the hang of it. If your child is too quick to hit "snooze" and doze off again, place the clock across the room from the bed so your child will have to get up to turn it off.
- **Keeping track of schoolwork.** Ask about your child's assignments. But don't question your middle schooler constantly about progress. Be clear that turning work in on time is your child's responsibility.

# Follow a game plan to limit your child's recreational screen time



In today's digital age, it's increasingly important for families to help middle schoolers manage their recreational screen time.

Excessive screen use can impact sleep, academic performance and overall well-being. Studies link excessive screen time to greater stress and poorer mental health.

Experts recommend practical strategies to help middle schoolers find a healthier balance. Here are four to try :

1. **Have your child** spend one week writing down the amount of time spent on recreational screen time activities. Challenge your child to reduce that time the following week.
2. **Create a tech curfew.** Your child should have at least 30 minutes of "unplugged" time to wind down before bedtime. The blue light

emitted by screens can interfere with the production of melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep.

3. **Establish digital-free zones** and times where all family members leave their screen devices behind.
4. **Don't use screen time** as a reward or punishment. It'll make it seem even more important to your child.

Source: J. Nagata, MD, MSc, "Screen Time Use Among US Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *JAMA Pediatrics*.

**"Put down the phone, turn off the laptop, and do something—anything—that does not involve a screen."**

—Jean Twenge,  
Psychology Professor

# Here's why middle schoolers should make time for reading



Most middle schoolers spend more time on assignments than they did when they were in elementary school. With the increased workload, reading for pleasure may be pretty far down on your child's list of priorities.

Here are a few reasons your middle schooler should make time for pleasure reading. Reading can:

1. **Make your child an expert.** Reading is the most effective way for your middle schooler to learn as much as possible about areas of interest.
2. **Take your child places.** Few people can afford to travel every place they'd like to go. But your child can always travel through a book

and then set goals to get there in person someday.

3. **Make your middle schooler laugh.** Appreciating the humor in books helps develop thinking skills. It also improves your child's own sense of humor.
4. **Turn your child into a detective.** A cold winter day is a perfect time for your child to grab a cup of hot chocolate and dive into a great mystery.
5. **Introduce characters** your child can relate to. Characters who are in the same age group face similar experiences, challenges and emotions, making middle schoolers feel understood and less alone in their own experiences.

# Are you showing your child how to be respectful?



One of the most effective ways families can encourage respectful behavior is to show children what it looks like. Are you model-

ing respect for your middle schooler? Take this quiz to find out:

- \_\_\_ 1. **Do you obey laws** meant to protect people, such as obeying the speed limit? Do you talk to your child about the importance of doing so?
- \_\_\_ 2. **Do you speak respectfully** of teachers and all they do to help children learn?
- \_\_\_ 3. **Do you demonstrate courtesy** and accept people's right to beliefs different from your own?
- \_\_\_ 4. **Do you make it a family rule** to treat others as you would like to be treated?
- \_\_\_ 5. **Do you demonstrate moral reasoning?** Let your child see you wrestle with such questions as, "What is the right thing to do?" "How would I want to be treated in this situation?"

**How well are you doing?**

More yes answers mean you are modeling respect and social awareness for your child. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

**Middle School Parents**  
*still make the difference!*

Practical Ideas for Parents  
to Help Their Children.

For subscription information call or write:  
The Parent Institute, 1-800-756-5525,  
P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474.  
Fax: 1-800-216-3667.

Or visit: [www.parent-institute.com](http://www.parent-institute.com).

Published monthly September through May.  
Copyright © 2024, The Parent Institute,  
a division of PaperClip Media, Inc.,  
an independent, private agency.  
Equal opportunity employer.

Publisher: Doris McLaughlin.  
Publisher Emeritus: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.  
Editor: Rebecca Hasty Miyares.

# Share a system to help your child do better on math tests



Math tests can be hard to prepare for. After all, there aren't any dates to remember or essays to write. To boost your

middle schooler's performance, share these math test strategies.

Before the test, students should:

- **Practice.** Your child can redo problems from assignments and quizzes—focusing on ones that were confusing or incorrect. Students should work on those math problems until they are confident they can solve them.
- **Create a “formula sheet.”** Your child should write down all the formulas that will be needed. Then, your child can create flash cards to help memorize each formula.

During the test, students should:

1. **Write down memorized formulas** before starting the test.
2. **Read directions carefully** and show all work to earn every point possible.
3. **Use estimation.** If one step in the problem says to subtract 32 from 109, estimating indicates the answer should be around 80. Comparing answers to estimates lets your child know when to try again.
4. **Use all available time.** Your child shouldn't feel pressured by how quickly others finish.
5. **Go back,** check work and rework any problems that were challenging or confusing.
6. **Look for careless errors.** Are all of the decimal points in the right place? If the answer includes a graph, are the axes labeled?

# Help your middle schooler balance activities & academics



Many middle schoolers are excited to dive into extracurricular activities. Activities are fun, build friendships and help

students feel more connected to the school. They teach respect for peers and adult leaders. They steer students away from simply “hanging out.” And they can be an important part of a successful college application.

However, there can be too much of a good thing. Academics are the most important part of school, so it's important to help your child find the right balance.

Encourage your child to:

- **Prioritize.** Ask, “Which activities have you enjoyed in past years? Which were the most beneficial?” Don't settle for a response like,

“I loved doing everything!” To make smart decisions about extracurricular activities, your child will need to evaluate each objectively.

- **List pros and cons.** After narrowing down favorite activities, have your child list the positives and negatives of each one. For instance, lacrosse was fun, but it consumed too many weekends. Help your child see each activity with a clear and critical eye.
- **Devise a plan.** Keeping each activity's pros and cons in mind, help your child select one or two to join after the winter break. Then, after participating for a few weeks, reassess the situation. If your child is struggling in a class, you may need to make some changes. But if your child is thriving, you may have found just the right balance!

**Q:** I know I'm deciding too many things for my middle schooler. How can I make sure my child avoids making poor decisions and makes responsible choices?

## Questions & Answers

**A:** Here's the short answer: You can't. Learning to make good decisions—and learning lessons from the bad ones—is part of growing up. So when your middle schooler makes a poor choice, don't see it as “letting” your child fail. Instead, view it as allowing your child to figure out what good decision-making is.

Of course, there are certain areas where your child should not be allowed to decide things. These include:

- **Health and safety.**
- **Drugs and alcohol.**
- **Chores.**
- **School attendance.**

Other areas, however, can be open for discussion—at least to a degree. Here are three:

1. **Studying.** A daily study time should be non-negotiable. But be flexible about *how* your child studies. If your child likes to work sprawled on the floor listening to music, allow it. Your child's grades will reveal whether it is effective.
2. **Bedtime.** If you've insisted on the same bedtime for years, revisit the issue. Let your child weigh in on an appropriate bedtime. If it's reasonable, allow it—as long as your child gets at least nine hours of sleep each night.
3. **Bedroom.** If you argue with your child about keeping the room clean, stop. Assuming it's not so horrible that the health department intervenes, let your child decide how tidy things should be.



# It Matters: Motivation

## Boost motivation as the winter break nears



Students have been in school for a few months and winter break is right around the corner. This is

the time when it is easy for middle schoolers to get distracted and lose focus.

To help your middle schooler remain motivated:

- **Follow a consistent schedule** that helps your child balance study time, leisure, and sleep. A structured routine helps reduce the likelihood of distractions.
- **Highlight past successes.** Say things like, “Yes, this is a very challenging project. But you did a great job on the last one because of all the time you put in. I know you can do that again with this project!”
- **Adopt a “one day at a time”** attitude. Encourage your child to focus on short-term goals rather than long-term ones. This makes tasks seem more manageable and less overwhelming.
- **Spend quality time together.** Making an ordinary day feel special can really improve your child’s mood and attitude. “I got the ingredients for your favorite dinner. Finish your assignment and then come and help me make it. After dinner, we can watch a movie together.”
- **Encourage your child** to get involved in a project that helps others. Community service helps middle schoolers shift the focus off themselves and onto others who have greater needs.

## Apply strategies to motivate your underachieving student

It’s frustrating when you know your child has the ability to succeed but seems not to want to. This is the trap of underachievement.

Families can do three things to get middle schoolers back on track:

1. **Show you care** about your child as a *person*, not just a student. If a long lecture about getting better grades were the trick to motivation, there would be no such thing as an underachiever. Make time to talk with your child about life, opinions or topics of interest. This helps your child feel valued—a key step in building motivation.
2. **Recognize improvements.** It might not thrill you if your child earns a low C on a history quiz. But if the last quiz grade was a D, your child has made progress. A pat on the back with a simple, “You



brought your grade up. I believe in you!” can work wonders.

3. **Harness the power of friends.** Consider enlisting the help of one of your child’s friends. “Grant is in your history class. Maybe the two of you could study for the next test together.”

## Students should ask themselves questions when setting goals



Want your middle schooler to be a self-motivated learner?

Encourage your child to set goals for each

class. Have your child ask and answer these questions:

- **“What do I want to achieve** in this class over the next grading period?” This can be a higher grade or another achievement, such as turning in all assignments on time.
- **“What is my plan** for meeting this goal?” Your child could make a study chart and follow it. Or,

double-check assignments and rubrics on the class website.

- **“How will I avoid distractions** or barriers that may conflict with my goals?” Your child could turn off unneeded devices during study hours, clean out book bags and organize school papers each night. Your child should write down the specific goals and the steps to take to achieve them. Post the list where you can both see it. Check it frequently to see how things are going, and encourage your child to make changes as needed.