Middle School
Parents®
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Daily conversations sharpen your child's thinking skills

What kind of thinker is your middle schooler? Can he tackle a tricky assignment in a clever way? Does he weigh all sides of an issue before picking a position? Will he give a reasoned opinion about something when asked?

If the answers are *no, no* and *no*, don't worry! Like other skills, your child's thinking skills can be sharpened over time.

To help your middle schooler learn to think critically:

- **Engage him in conversation.** Don't gloss over the issues of the day when sitting down to dinner. Really discuss them. Encourage your child to ask questions about the things he sees online or hears on the news. It may prompt him to consider those topics more deeply.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** When possible, avoid asking your child questions that can be answered with a simple *yes* or *no*. Instead, ask questions that are more likely to lead to a thoughtful response. "What has your science teacher said about the coronovirus?" may result in a more detailed answer than, "Did you talk about anything interesting in science class today?"
- **Read a news article** to your child or watch the news together. Then, ask him to share his opinion about specific topics in it.
- **Avoid quizzing him.** Boosting his critical-thinking skills shouldn't seem like school. Try not to make him feel as if you're testing him. Rather, keep your exchanges casual and friendly.

Set reasonable expectations for your child



It's important to set expectations for your middle schooler's academic success, but it's equally important to make sure those expectations are reasonable.

To determine whether you're setting the bar at the right level for your child, ask yourself if your expectations:

- **Are flexible.** Have you read parenting books telling you what your child "should be" doing, thinking or feeling at this age? Then you may have lost sight of the fact that most of that information is based on *averages*. It doesn't relate specifically to what any one individual should be doing (or achieving). Keep that in mind if you find yourself setting a goal for your child just because "all the other sixth graders" seem to be meeting it.
- **Reflect who she really is.** Do you see your child clearly when you're thinking about what she should achieve? If she has been a reluctant reader since preschool, pushing her to take honors English may not make sense. Work together with her teachers to set your child up for success.

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Reducing stress can improve your child's readiness to learn



Students who experience stress are at risk of having difficulty focusing in class and remembering what they learn.

To help your middle schooler manage stress, suggest that he:

- **Take several deep breaths.** It may sound simple, but it works surprisingly well. Taking time to stop and think about the issue at hand may help your child put it into perspective and discover a solution.
- **Focus on health.** Twenty to 30 minutes of exercise can relieve tension and clear your child's head. Eating right and getting adequate sleep every night will also keep your child feeling his best.
- **Keep a journal.** Some kids find that it's easier to write down their feelings than to talk about them. This is a great way to relieve stress.
- **Take a break from screens.** Unplugging from the digital world gives your child time to relax, read a book, listen to music or daydream.

Source: S. Vogel and others, "Stress Affects the Neural Ensemble for Integrating New Information and Prior Knowledge," *Neuroimage*, Elsevier.

"It's not the load that breaks you down, it's the way you carry it."

—Lou Holtz

Teach your middle schooler to focus on six key areas of writing



It can be hard to help middle schoolers with their writing. They're often sensitive to criticism and resistant to suggestions for improvement.

Try offering guidance *before* your child begins writing. Encourage her to focus on these six key areas:

1. **Ideas and content.** Your child's writing should be interesting to read and should stick to the topic at hand. The reader should be able to understand and follow what she is trying to say.
2. **Organization.** Her writing should have a clear beginning, middle and ending. It should clearly present a main idea. Other sentences should give details that support the main idea.
3. **Voice.** Your child's writing should represent her. Her personality, feelings and tone should shine through.
4. **Sentence structure.** Your child's writing should grab the reader's attention. The sentences should have a natural flow, similar to a conversation. Each sentence should be distinct. Your child should avoid repeating word patterns. For example, one or two sentences may begin with "I feel" or "This is" but the others should all begin quite differently.
5. **Choice of words.** Her writing should "paint a picture." When she describes something, the reader should be able to visualize it. Quality writing does not use words that simply take up space and have little meaning for the reader.
6. **Mechanics.** Your child should proofread her work and use correct spelling, grammar and punctuation.

Are you helping your child handle new relationships?



It's not too early to start talking to your child about romantic relationships. Are you providing guidance that will help your child navigate tricky interactions when the time comes? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

___**1. Have you talked to your child** about the basics of dating—respect for yourself, respect for the other person, kindness and consideration?

___**2. Are you remaining calm?** Many middle school relationships are more about friendship than they are about getting "serious."

___**3. Have you discussed rules** about relationships with your child and reminded him that school comes first?

___**4. Do you show respect** for your child's feelings?

___**5. Do you talk** about your family's values regarding appropriate behavior? Have you talked about all of the consequences of risky behavior?

How well are you doing?

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are preparing your middle schooler to handle this new phase. For *no* answers, try those ideas in the quiz.

Middle School Parents still make the difference!

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Encourage your child to make these New Year resolutions



Your middle schooler started the school year with the best of intentions. But lately, things seem to be off track. He's missing some assignments. He waits until the last minute to get things done.

Middle schoolers often need a "reboot" in the middle of the school year. Making a few New Year's resolutions is one way to get your child back on the path to success.

Suggest that your child resolve to:

- **Get organized.** Let's face it—middle schoolers are not always organized. Have your child use helpful tools to keep track of his schedule and school assignments. He can use a calendar, sticky notes, to-do lists and an assignment notebook. Help him get into the habit of cleaning out his school notebooks regularly.
- **Set a schedule**. By January, many students have abandoned their schoolwork routines. Help your child reestablish a work time, and then make sure he studies at that time every day. It won't take long for it to become a habit.
- **Give "mono-tasking"** a try. Kids claim they are multitasking when they listen to music, chat with friends and try to do assignments all at the same time. But the truth is that their brains can't really handle all that activity. Encourage your child to focus on one thing at a time.
- **Set a new goal.** Would he like to raise his English grade? Encourage him to figure out what it will take to reach that goal. When students are clear about the steps they must take to reach a goal, it's easier to make the choices that will help them achieve it!

Behavior is easier to understand if you know how preteens think



Parenting a middle schooler today can be challenging. Your child acts like he knows everything, and at times he seems so grown up.

The important word is *seems*. It doesn't matter how cool your child acts—it will be years before he can think like an adult.

Keep in mind that:

- **Emotional thinking** usually wins out over rational thinking with middle schoolers. That's why kids this age may lash out if they think they've been treated unfairly. Your child is not ready to stop and think: "I'd better cool it because I might get in trouble." He is more likely to respond with pure emotion.

  Together, brainstorm respectful ways your child can respond when he's upset, such as excusing himself and walking away. Counting to 10 before blowing his top can work, too.
- **Your child lives in the moment.** He may not grasp that his semester grade may drop if he doesn't study for his test tonight. To him, the end of the semester is light-years away. What he does tonight can't possibly affect anything that far away.

  Don't force your middle schooler to make a connection he is not ready to make. Instead, 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.

Q: My daughter mopes around a lot and seems very unhappy. How can I know if she's just sad or truly depressed?

Questions & Answers

A: Middle schoolers are known for their mood swings. Because of hormonal changes, they can be up one day and down the next.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown have impacted the mental health of adolescents, so you are wise to be on the lookout for depression.

Here are some facts: Kids who have a depressed parent are at greater risk of getting this illness. So are kids who are under stress, have a learning disorder, or experience a loss.

Your child might be depressed if one or more of the following signs persist for a few weeks:

- **Frequent sadness,** crying, anger or irritability.
- **Less interest in school** or other activities.
- **Feelings of worthlessness** or guilt.
- **Difficulty sleeping,** or problems oversleeping.
- **No energy.**
- **Loss or change in appetite** or weight.
- **Poor communication.**
- **Difficulty concentrating.**
- **Frequent headaches** or stomachaches.
- **Preoccupation with death** or suicide.

If you suspect your daughter is depressed, don't hesitate to get professional help. If treatment is delayed, the situation could get worse and be harder to treat.

Be available to discuss any concerns your daughter might have. Listen. Show respect and let her know you are here to help.

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It Matters: Schoolwork

Six benefits of studying a foreign language



Today, fewer students in the U.S. are learning to speak a language other than English. But research shows there are significant benefits to learning another language.

When students study foreign languages, they enhance their:

1. **Memory skills.** Language students must learn and remember lots of new vocabulary. They find that strengthening their memory is like strengthening a muscle. The more they use it, the stronger it gets.
2. **Understanding** of their first language. Students start to figure out how language works. That understanding helps them improve writing, reading, and even testing skills. Students who speak a second language consistently score higher on standardized tests.
3. **Problem-solving skills.** Studies show that students who speak two languages also do better in math and science.
4. **Sense of achievement.** Learning another language is a challenge. As students master it, they see they can tackle difficult subjects.
5. **Ability to get a job.** Many employers want to hire people who can speak more than one language.
6. **Understanding of the world.** In many ways, the world is growing smaller. Speaking more than one language helps students understand the changes they see.

Source: "What Does Research Show About the Benefits of Language Learning?" American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

Mastering skills and strategies makes study time productive

In middle school, your child must increase her skill level to work independently and effectively—especially during times of remote learning.

During study time, she should:

- **Answer six key questions.** Your child should always find out: *who, what, when, where, why* and *how*. This will lead to a basic understanding of many reading assignments. It will also help her write an outline.
- **Learn vocabulary.** Your child will struggle with an assignment if she doesn't understand the language in it. Encourage her to look up the definitions of unfamiliar words in the dictionary.
- **Weigh important information.** Many assignments will require your child to understand the difference between central ideas and details. Practice this with your child: "Elise dropped tears on her blue shirt as she walked up to the house." What is more important, the fact that Elise had a blue shirt on or that she was crying?
- **Compare and contrast.** Can your child tell how things are alike and how they are different from one another? This skill will help her with several subjects, particularly English and history. Ask her, "How are a cat and a dog alike? How are they different?"



Show your child how to take responsibility for learning



Is your middle schooler sweating his next big test or assignment? Help him take responsibility for his learning by showing him how to prepare for it. The best way he can prepare is to sharpen his study skills every day. Here's how:

- **Encourage him to read ahead.** By skimming over the next day's lesson or chapter ahead of time, he'll be better prepared for class. This may also help him ask better questions or participate more.
- **Have him review his notes.** Even if he doesn't have an assignment in a certain class, he should still look over the day's notes at night. It's a quick, easy way to remind himself of what's being taught.
- **Make sure he's in class.** Your child won't learn the day's lesson if he isn't in class. He should only miss school when it's necessary.