Middle School
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Parent & Family Engagement
still make the difference!



Research-proven strategies boost your child's learning

Your middle schooler should have a designated place to do schoolwork. But that's not the *only* place she should study. Research shows that students remember content better if they review the material in different places.

To optimize learning and memory, students should:

1. **Study the same information** in different locations. This forces the brain to make multiple associations with the material. When the brain relates the information to more than one background, the information has a better chance of sticking.
2. **Vary the material they study** in a single study session. For example, your teen might alternate studying vocabulary words and reading her history textbook. Concentrating on multiple skills, rather than on one at a time, leaves a deeper impression on the brain.
3. **Space out study sessions** over a period of days. This helps the brain retain the material for longer than a day or two. Cramming for a test the night before may get students a passing grade. But it won't lead to real long-term learning.. To the brain, a quick fill leads to a quick empty.
4. **Write down a few notes** after each class. This forces them to recall the information they learned.

Source: "Applying Cognitive Psychology to Enhance Educational Practice," Bjork Learning And Forgetting Lab, UCLA, niswc.com/mid_memory2.

Talk to your child about a healthy lifestyle



Middle school is a time of great change, including physical change. Kids start to look at their bodies in a new light. Too often, they decide they don't like what they see.

Studies show that body image has a significant impact on academic performance. To help your child develop a healthy body image:

- **Don't criticize your own body.** Your child may decide that disliking his body is normal.
- **Don't criticize** your child's appearance. Never use words like *chubby* or *scrawny*.
- **Provide facts** about puberty. It is not unusual for a child going through puberty to suddenly gain weight. This is part of the change from a child's body to the body of a young adult.
- **Focus on lifestyle,** not weight. Healthy eating should be something the whole family strives for. So should exercise. The point is to be fit, not thin.

If you think your child may have a weight problem, schedule an appointment with his doctor.

Source: A. Paolini, "School Counselors: Promoting Healthy Body Image Amongst Adolescents," *International Journal of School and Cognitive Psychology,* Longdom Publishing.

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Consistency is key when it comes to effective discipline



Your middle schooler pays close attention to the way the adults in his life treat him. This includes the way they enforce discipline. He needs a consistent message that shows authority figures are serious and will follow through.

To promote consistent discipline, follow these guidelines:

- **Agree on rules** and consequences if you are parenting or monitoring school days with another caregiver. It can prevent your child from taking advantage of either of you.
- **Discuss your rules** with relatives or friends who care for your child. For example, if you expect your child to be home by a certain time on weekends, then he should be home by that time when he stays with a grandparent.
- **Support the school rules** and expectations for students. Make sure you and your child understand teachers' policies regarding tests, assignments and turning in late work. Expect your middle schooler to follow the rules. If you have questions or concerns, contact the teacher.

"It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

—Frederick Douglass

Everyday activities can help your child practice math skills



If your middle schooler is going to be successful in math, it is important for you to be familiar with what she's learning and to support it.

Research shows that the attitude you display about math can affect your child's success with it. To support her, have a positive attitude and look for ways to help her practice math skills every day. Here are a few ideas:

- **For arithmetic,** have your child look at the grocery receipt and add up how much you spent on vegetables. If you pick up dinner, ask her to calculate the tip.
- **For measurement,** let your child handle any measurements you need to do around the house. This includes calculating the area of a room, doubling a cookie recipe, finding out the height of your plants—anything to help your child feel more competent and comfortable with measurement.
- **For statistics,** encourage your child to read graphs and interpret them. You can find many examples in news articles.
- **For estimation,** have your child help you plan a car trip. She can estimate the amount of fuel you'll need or the time she thinks you will arrive based on miles per hour and distance traveled. When one of you is doing a job, such as sweeping a room, ask your child to estimate how long it will take. Then have her compare her answer with the actual amount of time it took.

Source: V. Thompson and K. Mayfield-Ingram, *Family Math: The Middle School Years,* Lawrence Hall of Science, University of California at Berkeley.

Do you help your child deal with tough teachers?



Sooner or later, every student encounters a tough teacher. Are you helping your child deal with this challenge?

Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

___**1. Have you reminded** your child that throughout her life she will have to work with all kinds of people?

___**2. Have you talked** with your child about her goals for the class? If she wants to learn the subject and earn a good grade, she will need to work with the teacher.

___**3. Have you brainstormed** with your child about things she can do to improve the relationship?

___**4. Have you reassured** your child that she is a capable student who works hard—and that you believe in her?

___**5. Will you encourage** your child to talk with her counselor if she has persistent problems with a teacher?

How well are you doing?

Each *yes* means you are helping your child learn how to address issues with teachers. For each *no* answer, try that idea in the quiz.

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Teach your middle schooler to make decisions in five steps



Decision-making can be a tough process for middle schoolers. However, there are few skills more important in school and in life than learning to make wise decisions.

Teach your child to follow these five steps:

1. **Get the facts.** Let's say he has been asked to look after a neighbor's dog for the weekend. He should find out exactly what he will need to do. How often will he need to feed and walk the dog? At what times?
2. **Anticipate conflicts.** Your child has to study this weekend. He has also been invited to go on a hike with a friend and his family. Can he do both and still care for the dog? If the dog needs to be let out several times during the day and the hike lasts all day, your child will have to choose between the two.
3. **Consider the consequences** of each choice. If he skips the hike, will his friend be upset? If he turns down the job, will the neighbor ask another person to care for the dog in the future?
4. **Come up with alternatives.** Perhaps your child can explain to his friend that he is trying to get steady work caring for the dog. Could he join his friend on a hike another weekend instead?
5. **Accept that decisions** may have downsides. If your child decides to miss the hike and care for the dog, he is giving up time with a friend. But he is gaining a chance to look after the dog when his neighbor travels. Sometimes good decisions require a small sacrifice to achieve a long-term benefit.

Help your child see mistakes on tests as learning opportunities



Your middle schooler probably knows that a test is an assessment of what she has learned. But does she know that a test is also a *way* to learn? Unless your child is perfect, each test she takes should be a learning experience for her.

To help your middle schooler learn the most from tests, encourage her to:

- **Jot down thoughts** about the test as soon as possible after taking it. What did she struggle with? What does she think she knew best?
- **Keep the test** if the teacher gives it back. Some teachers require students to correct their tests. If her teacher doesn't, your child should correct it anyway, and save it to use as a study guide for midterms or finals.
- **Figure out** what kinds of mistakes she made. Were they careless errors? That is a warning to pay closer attention when answering. Were they errors representing a lack of knowledge? Suggest that she come up with ways to study more effectively next time—such as by taking notes from the textbook or making a study guide. If she doesn't understand a concept, she could find a video explanation online.

Source: W.R. Luckie and W. Smethurst, *Study Power: Study Skills to Improve Your Learning & Your Grades,* Brookline Books.

Q: I caught my seventh-grader copying all the answers for a school assignment from a friend. He says that it's not a big deal and that everyone in middle school does it. What should I do?

Questions & Answers

A: Cheating is a serious issue. Experts suggest setting aside time to talk and really listen to your child.

Tell him that cheating *is* a big deal and it is wrong. It's dishonest and unfair to those who don't cheat. Plus it robs him of learning the skills and information he will need in future classes.

Let your child know that you are unhappy about his cheating, but you're also worried about the cause. Why did he feel the need to cheat? Is he afraid of disappointing you or getting punished for less-than-perfect grades? Is he trying to get special rewards for top grades?

Make sure you're not putting too much emphasis on getting perfect grades. Also be sure to stress the importance of learning for learning's sake—not just to get a reward.

Work together to find a solution that will help him complete work without cheating. To support your child:

- **Help him manage his time.** If he doesn't feel like he has time to finish his schoolwork, help him adjust his priorities.
- **Help him improve** his study habits so he can make better grades on his own.
- **Encourage him to ask** his teacher for help if he doesn't understand the assignment.

If the problem persists, talk to your child's teacher. Together you will be able to get your son back on the right track.

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It Matters: Motivation

Self-affirmation activity boosts performance



It's no secret that motivation can affect a student's performance in class. Children who lack motivation just don't perform up to their ability.

A series of studies show that a simple writing task can increase motivation and boost academic performance: Students were asked to write for five to 10 minutes about a value that mattered to them. They explained why they chose the value (such as *friendship* or *honesty*). They also wrote about how that value affected how they acted and felt. Students repeated this activity several times during the school term.

The results? Students who completed this "self-affirmation" writing activity performed better in class and earned higher grades. And the benefits lasted beyond one year. The next year, these students signed up for more challenging classes and continued to earn high grades.

The impact was especially strong for middle school students, who are beginning to make choices that can affect their future. Some choose to give their best effort and succeed. Others quit trying.

In the studies, teachers assigned these writing exercises to students. Why not encourage your child to try something similar for herself? Together, brainstorm a list of values that are important to her. Then, have your child spend some time each day writing about them in a journal.

Source: M. Martinovich, "Self-affirmation plays role in minority students' college success," Phys.org; "Benefits of Self-Affirmation," Carnegie Mellon University.

Middle school students share what they need from parents

When children feel loved and supported at home, they are more motivated to learn. According to experts, kids who enjoy strong relationships with parents:

- **Feel safer** and have a sunnier outlook than kids who don't.
- **Are less likely** than other kids to cheat on a test.
- **Feel healthier** and happier than other kids.
- **Believe they'll succeed** in the future.
- **Are more likely** than other kids to excel academically.

What's the best way to show your child your love? When asked in a survey, students said they'd like their parents to:

- **Take** an interest in schoolwork.
- **Listen** to them when they talk.
- **Avoid** comparing them to others.
- **Spend** more time with them.



- **Avoid** lecturing about mistakes.
- **Treat** them with respect.
- **Set** reasonable rules and limits.
- **Notice** when they do things right.
- **Offer** guidance.

Source: A. Jackson and others, *Making the Most of Middle School: A Field Guide for Parents and Others,* Teachers College Press.

Inspire your middle schooler to work hard and succeed



A motivated student is a dedicated student. To inspire your middle schooler to do well in school:

- **Help him get organized.** It's tough to stay motivated when notes and assignments are scattered all over the place. So help your child sort and file things by subject.
- **Nurture his curiosity.** Learning happens everywhere, not just during a class. Encourage your child to explore outside interests. If he likes art, for example, check out a virtual art exhibit together.
- **Offer feedback.** When you see your child working hard, let him know that you notice! If he does well on a project, talk about how much his effort has paid off.
- **Be patient with him.** Chances are, you're not always motivated to work. So don't expect your child to be forever gung-ho about school. When he's less than enthusiastic, be encouraging. With your support, he'll likely get back on track soon.