

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

N. L. Dillard Middle School

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Teach your child to use study strategies that improve results

Having a designated place to do schoolwork helps students stay organized and establish study habits. But that's not the only place your student should study. Research shows that students remember content better if they review it in multiple places.

To optimize learning and memory, encourage your middle schooler to:

- **Study the same material** in different locations. This forces the brain to make multiple associations with the information. When the brain relates it to more than one background, the information has a better chance of sticking.
- **Vary the material** studied in a single session. Your child might alternate solving one type of math problem with another, for example. Or study vocabulary words, and then read a history text.
- **Space out study sessions** over a period of days. Repeated studying over time improves long-term recall. Cramming the night before a test may lead to a passing grade, but it won't lead to lasting learning.
- **Write down a few summarizing notes** after each class. This helps students practice recalling and synthesizing the information.

Source: M.N. Imundo and others, "Where and how to learn: The interactive benefits of contextual variation, restudying, and retrieval practice for learning," *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, Sage.



Tests are also ways to learn

Every test your student takes should be a learning experience. After a test, have your child jot down some thoughts: *What was confusing? What was easy? How could I have prepared more effectively?* When the teacher returns the test, have your child correct wrong answers and save it to use as a study guide.



Encourage everyday math

To foster math success, look for ways to work math into your time with your child each day. Ask your middle schooler to:

- **Estimate** the amount of fuel you'll need to drive a certain distance at a certain speed, the time it will take to complete a chore, etc.
- **Calculate** the cost of the vegetables in your grocery bag, the average age of family members, etc.
- **Measure** the area of a room, the ingredients in a recipe, the height of plants, etc.



Consistency boosts discipline's effect

Middle schoolers pay close attention to the way the adults in their lives treat them. This includes the way they enforce discipline.

It's important to provide your child with a consistent message that shows that you are serious and will follow through.

Here are some guidelines for implementing consistent discipline:

- **Agree on rules** and consequences with your child's other parent(s). Make it clear to your child that disciplinary actions imposed by one parent will be upheld by all.
- **Discuss your rules** with relatives or friends who care for your child. If you expect your child to be home at a certain time, the rule should also apply when your child stays with a grandparent.
- **Expect your child** to follow school rules. Make sure you both understand teachers' policies about tests, assignments and late work. If you have questions or concerns, contact the teacher.

Keep body image healthy

Many middle school students look at their changing bodies and don't like what they see. Body image has an impact on school performance. To help your child develop a healthy one:

- **Provide facts** about puberty. Weight gain is often a part of the change from a child's body to that of a young adult.
- **Avoid criticizing** your child's physical appearance or your own.
- **Focus on health**, not weight. Healthy eating and exercise should be goals for the whole family.

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



What can I say about a poor report card that will help?

Q: Report card time always causes tension between me and my middle schooler. How can I keep a talk about my child's not-so-great grades from turning into a fight?

A: Try not to see a report card simply as evidence of your child's performance in a completed marking period. Instead, view it as a chance to think together about your student's overall progress and how to move it forward.

For a more productive discussion:

- **Keep your emotions under control.** Does a low grade make you feel worried, disappointed or angry? Your child may react to your feelings by getting defensive. Staying calm lets you both focus on solutions.
- **Consider your expectations.** Do you automatically assume a C+ is an awful grade? It's important to consider the context. Are the grades based on mastery for the whole year? Is this a tough class? Has your child been going through a rough patch emotionally? These things matter when determining whether a poor grade is due to lack of effort.
- **Get your child's input.** Ask questions like: *How do you feel about this grade? Does it reflect what you've learned and the effort you've put in? What do you think you could do to improve it?* Then help your child set learning goals and plan steps to take to reach them.



Are you promoting community service?

Middle schoolers are more motivated when they understand that they can make meaningful contributions in the world. Are you encouraging your child to contribute by volunteering? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

- ___ **1. Do you teach** your child about the responsibility to help the less fortunate?
- ___ **2. Do you encourage** volunteering to help causes that your child cares about?
- ___ **3. Do you help** your child find ways to get involved?
- ___ **4. Do you support** your child's efforts in ways you can, such as by providing or arranging a ride?
- ___ **5. Do you discuss** ways that small efforts combine to make a big difference?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are helping your child feel capable of changing things for the better. For each no, try that idea from the quiz.

"Believe with all your heart that how you live your life makes a difference."

—Colin Brown

Give your child the support that middle schoolers want

Family love and support helps motivate students to do well in school. When asked in a survey, students said it helps when their families:

- **Take an interest** in their schoolwork.
- **Avoid comparing** them to others.
- **Offer guidance**, without lecturing about mistakes.
- **Notice when** they do things right.
- **Spend time** with them.

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

Suggest a values journal

Researchers asked middle schoolers to write several times about a value (such as *honesty*) that mattered to them, why they chose it and how it affected the ways they acted and felt. Many at-risk students improved their grades, and the next year, they signed up for more challenging classes.

To try a similar exercise at home, have your child make a list of important values. Then from time to time, have your student write about them in a journal.



Source: M. Martinovich, "Self-affirmation plays role in minority students' college success," Phys.org.

Activities foster friendships

Forming friendships with other students can help your child feel more connected to school. To help your child find classmates with similar interests, suggest checking out clubs and extracurricular activities. It may be hard for your child to spot a child who likes the same things when walking in the halls, but a student in chess club probably enjoys playing chess, too.

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