

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



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Use questions and conversations to strengthen critical thinking

From middle school on, the ability to think critically is increasingly important for academic success. In addition to memorizing facts, your child will be asked to analyze, evaluate and apply information. He will be expected to support his answers and opinions with evidence and examples from his reading and experience.

To help your child build these skills:

- **Ask questions** that require thought. When your child is reading a novel, for example, you might ask why he thinks the main character acted a certain way, or how he would have written the ending differently.
- **Take conversations** to the next level. Explore a variety of topics in depth, from the weather to civic issues. Discuss what you know and what you don't, and how you could find out more.
- **Ask for explanations.** When your child reaches a decision about something, have him tell you how he came to his conclusion. Use "Why?" as a follow-up question when your child expresses an opinion. "Because" isn't an acceptable answer!
- **Talk about opinion "news."** Editorials, columns and commentary promote certain points of view. Look at an editorial with your child. Does he agree with the opinion? What facts did the author use to support it? Can your child think of facts that go against the argument?



Make rules and expectations clear

Discipline works best when your child understands the behavior you expect. So it's important to choose words and phrases that make your meaning clear and that don't unintentionally provoke misbehavior.

Here are some guidelines:

- **Simply state** what you want your child to do. Don't ask pointless questions like "how many times have I told you not to ...?"
- **Be specific.** Children don't learn from phrases like "Grow up!" Instead, say "It is your responsibility to remember your chores." Avoid adding extra words or phrases that leave room for error. "Finish your chores today," is more specific than "Try to finish your chores today."
- **Be straightforward** rather than threatening: "Our rule is homework before dinner." Saying "If you don't do your homework before dinner, you can't have dessert," gives your child a choice—and she might just decide to give up dessert.

Four ways homework works

Students love to complain about homework, so it's helpful for parents to know why teachers assign it. Different kinds of assignments have different purposes:

1. **Practice homework** helps students reinforce a skill by applying it repeatedly.
2. **Preparation homework** introduces new topics that will be taught in class.
3. **Extension homework** helps students think about how separate topics relate to one another.
4. **Creative homework** challenges kids to use different skills to show what they've learned.



Put planning on the calendar

Middle schoolers have six or more classes as well as activities and other commitments. Organization can make the difference between doing well in school and sinking. Sit down with your child for a few minutes each Sunday to plan the week ahead. Get out your family calendar and have your child write down important deadlines and events. She'll practice scheduling time, and the days will go more smoothly.



Offer support at study time

Three strategies can help you help your child study for any test:

1. **Ask your child** to explain the topic to you. Just putting it into his own words can help the concepts stick in his mind.
2. **Help him think of ways** to get clarification (redo a sample problem, etc.) if he is confused about the material.
3. **Have him close his eyes** and create a mental image of what he is studying. A picture really is worth a thousand words.



What can I do to get honest answers about school?

Q: When I ask how school is going, my child says “fine.” But her latest report card wasn’t fine. She has also said she didn’t have homework when she did. How can I convince her to tell me the truth about school?

A: Sometimes when middle schoolers deny the truth, it’s because they are scared. They worry that they will disappoint their parents or get in trouble. They think that if they ignore a problem it might go away. So start by asking yourself some questions: Do I react calmly to unpleasant news? Am I quick to blame and criticize? Are my rules too strict? Are my expectations realistic?

Next, talk to your child about the importance of being honest, especially about school and schoolwork. In your conversation:

- **Make it clear that you** have your child’s back. Explain that solving school problems is a team effort and she can count on your support.
- **Try to determine** what is causing your child’s difficulties. Sometimes it’s not academic ability, but poor study habits or test anxiety.
- **Avoid accusations** and demands. She’ll think better if she’s relaxed.
- **Offer reassurance.** Say that your child is not the only student to face schoolwork dilemmas. Together, brainstorm solutions she could try. Reach out to your child’s teachers for more ideas.



Are you teaching your child to take care?

Has your child ever done poorly in a subject he knows well? Poor grades are often the result of careless mistakes, rather than lack of knowledge. Are you emphasizing the importance of working carefully? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

- ___ **1. Do you tell** your child to use all available time and pay attention to details?
- ___ **2. Do you encourage** him to double-check his answers before submitting work?
- ___ **3. Do you reinforce** the idea that “neatness counts” both at home and in school?
- ___ **4. Do you suggest** that your child reread directions and rubrics to be sure that he is doing what is asked?
- ___ **5. Do you review** your child’s finished assignments together

to ensure they are neat and complete?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are encouraging thorough and accurate work. For each no, try that idea.

“The difference between something good and something great is attention to detail.”

—Charles R. Swindoll

Give your child the benefit of attentive listening

“They don’t listen!” Many parents say this about their kids. But middle schoolers often have the same complaint about their parents. To improve communication with your child:

- **Don’t ask her to wait** to talk to you unless it’s really necessary. If you always put her off, she may never share her news.
- **Create opportunities** for conversation. Then be quiet so your child knows you are listening.
- **Let your child talk.** Don’t assume you know what she is going to say. If you speak over her or hijack the conversation to make a different point, you may never hear what she was going to tell you.

Build reading connections

Recognizing the words is only one part of reading comprehension. Your child also needs to understand the passage as a whole.

Making connections to something he has learned, read or done in the past (his background knowledge) gives the material meaning and boosts his comprehension. Strengthen the base of knowledge your child brings to reading by helping him find books and articles on a wide variety of topics that interest him.



Source: R. Smith and others, “The Role of Background Knowledge in Reading Comprehension: A Critical Review,” *Reading Psychology*, Taylor & Francis.

Foster capable feelings

Students with confidence in their abilities often achieve more because they believe they *can* reach their goals. To support this belief:

- **Allow your child** to make as many decisions for herself as possible.
- **Ask for her help**, or ask her to help a sibling or a friend with something.

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