

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

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Help your child overcome a study slump and regain motivation

Middle schoolers can fall into the “Why work hard?” trap any time, especially in the winter months. Revive your child’s motivation and focus by helping her understand the value of what she’s doing. Reinforce positive habits and build her confidence in her own abilities.

Here’s how:

- **Make connections.** Does your child love video games? Can she imagine working with computers someday? Remind her that solid math skills could be her ticket into that field.
- **Praise solid effort.** When your child works hard on a test or paper, say how proud you are. Middle schoolers may act like they don’t want adults’ approval, but they really do. There’s no motivator like a pat on the back from you.
- **Celebrate progress.** Did your child earn a B on that tough history test after getting C’s in the fall? Prepare a special dinner! Or take everyone out for ice cream. Celebrating the positive results of hard work could be just the boost your child needs to keep striving.
- **Encourage her to challenge herself.** It may be too late to take a different class this year, but it’s time to think about choosing courses for next year. Discuss the possibilities of signing up for a few more rigorous classes.



Was it a mistake or neglect?

There’s a difference between making an honest mistake and neglecting a responsibility. If your child did the even math problems when she was supposed to do the odd ones, she made a mistake and needs to pay more attention to directions. But if she didn’t even try to do the assignment at all:

- **Make** it clear that this is neglect, and it isn’t OK.
- **Remind** her that school is her #1 responsibility.
- **Impose** a consequence that relates to the neglected task.



Source: K. Thomsen, M.S. *Parenting Preteens with a Purpose*, Search Institute Press.

Encourage healthy respect

Teaching your child to have respect for you, himself and others will help him have a better school experience. To instill respect:

- **Demonstrate it**, by treating your child and the people around you fairly.
- **Earn it**, by being reasonable, reliable, firm and loving—not by giving into nagging or acting like your child’s buddy.

Exercise is a smart move

If your middle schooler feels like she has more control over her body, she may feel more in control of her studies as well. In a recent study of 11-year olds, regular physical activity was found to have a positive effect on academic achievement, because it helped students manage their behavior to achieve goals.



If your child says she doesn’t have time to exercise, help her rearrange her schedule so she can fit some physical activity into her day. You could even plan to work out together!

Source: F. Vasilopoulos and M.R. Ellefson, “Investigation of the associations between physical activity, self-regulation and educational outcomes in childhood,” *PLOS ONE*.



Begin preparing now for a bright future

The middle and high school years go by quickly, and students have a lot to learn to be ready for a fulfilling life afterward. To help your child prepare:

- **Model positive work habits**, including promptness, cooperation and responsibility.
- **Encourage him to explore** a variety of interests through classes and activities such as school clubs and volunteering.
- **Have him take** self-assessments that will reveal his strengths, interests and possible career matches. You can find some online or ask a school counselor.
- **Help him go online** to find out the specifics of jobs that interest him, such as education requirements, skills needed and salaries.
- **Research higher education.** Learn more about different options—like technical schools and two- and four-year colleges.
- **Calculate the basic cost** of living (rent, food, clothes, etc.) with your child. Compare it to the average pay of jobs that interest him.



How can I help my child recover from a poor start?

Q: My seventh grader's grades were lower in the first half of the year than he and I would have liked. What can I do to help him finish the school year strong?

A: There is plenty of time left for your son to turn things around. He already knows he's made mistakes, so you don't need to dwell on them. Instead, encourage him to consider this a fresh start. Then, to help him commit to positive school habits:



- **Set reasonable, attainable goals.** For instance, if your child earned all C's last grading period, he could aim for bringing at least some of them up to B's. Help him outline the steps he'll take to do it.
- **Require a daily study time.** It should be when your child is most alert. If he has no assignments due the next day, he can read ahead or rework sample problems.
- **Be strict about bedtime.** If your child always stays up to watch "just one more video" there's a good chance he's not getting enough sleep. Sleepy students don't perform as well academically, so insist that your child head to bed (without digital devices) at a reasonable hour.
- **Monitor his progress.** Don't wait until your child fails a quiz to discover he's struggling in class. Talk together often about what he's learning and encourage him to go early to his teachers for help.

Don't avoid tough topics

Some discussions with your child can be awkward for both of you. But guidance from parents on sensitive topics is important to a child's healthy development. From time to time, explore topics such as these with your middle schooler:

- **The physical and emotional effects** of puberty.
- **Basic facts about sex**, reproduction and your family's values.
- **How your child views** controversial, tragic or disturbing current events.

There's more than one way to encourage reading

Even if your child doesn't read many novels, that's no reason to label her a non-reader. And if you do, she's likely to believe it. There is value in all kinds of reading. If your child reads:



- **Social media** or popular culture articles, she has learned to read for pleasure and interest.
- **Text messages**, she has learned to use reading and writing to communicate.
- **How-to manuals**, she has learned that reading can teach her practical skills.

Encourage a wide variety of reading activities and help your child see herself as a reader.



Are you connecting and communicating?

Some middle schoolers close parents out of important parts of their lives. Are you maintaining a connection with your child that will help keep the lines of communication open? How many of the questions below can you answer?

___ **1. Do you know** the names of your child's teachers and their subjects? Who is her favorite:

_____.

___ **2. Do you listen** to your child's music sometimes? What is her favorite song or group:

_____.

___ **3. Can you name** students your child often eats lunch with? Write one name:

_____.

___ **4. Do you know** who your child texts regularly? Name two friends: _____ and _____.

___ **5. Do you take** your child's worries seriously? Name one of her current concerns:

_____.

How well are you doing?

Ask your child. Show her your answers and talk about them. Can she answer some similar questions about you?

"Communication works for those who work at it."

—John Powell

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