

# Parents

Gadsden City Schools



## Connections, imagination & humor boost brain power

It's common for middle schoolers to seem more concerned with their friends than with what they're learning. Many act silly one minute and feel overwhelmed the next.

Sound familiar? If so, your child is a typical middle schooler. Brain research sheds some light on the behaviors that worry adults (and drive them crazy). Adolescents act this way because the emotional part of the brain develops faster than the rational part of the brain.

Over the next few years, you are likely to witness swings in your child's emotions. However, you can use emotions to maximize your child's ability to learn. Here's how:

- **Make learning personal.** Middle schoolers tend to think the world revolves around them. So, link

learning to your child's life. When studying the Revolutionary War, ask about a time your child felt like revolting against authority.

- **Promote imagination.** Help your child put imagination to work while studying. Ask questions like, "What do you think it would have felt like to be there with George Washington at Valley Forge?"
- **Use humor.** Middle schoolers love to laugh and make jokes. Look for funny cartoons, GIFs or videos about subjects your child is learning. They can satisfy your middle schooler's desire to laugh and promote learning at the same time.

*Source: T. Armstrong, Ph.D. The Power of the Adolescent Brain: Strategies for Teaching Middle and High School Students, ASCD.*

## Use report cards to set goals and celebrate effort



Whether your middle schooler's report card is better or worse than you expected, it's an ideal learning

opportunity. With your child:

- **Celebrate.** Straight A's are a reason to celebrate, but so is working hard to bring up a grade in a class. Always acknowledge things your middle schooler does well first.
- **Talk about issues.** Are there many surprises? Discuss them with your middle schooler. If you're upset about a particular grade, remember to stay calm. Say, "I'm disappointed about that C in English. What do you think are the reasons for it? Do you think it reflects how much you've learned?"
- **Set goals.** Use the report card to help your child chart a course for the rest of the school year. If your child did well, talk about ways to keep up the good work. If your child struggled, brainstorm ways to improve things going forward. "You did a great job of turning in your science assignments, but you stumbled on tests. What if I start quizzing you each night of the week leading up to a test?"

# Effective ways to handle your middle schooler's outbursts

Just when you thought your child had outgrown tantrums, along comes adolescence. Preteens are notorious for their strong emotions. Here are tips for handling your child's angry outbursts:


- **Stay in control.** Overreacting to your child's anger only adds fuel to the fire. Give your child some space and time to settle down. Resume your discussion when you're both calm.
- **Avoid harsh punishment.** It's tempting to yell, "You're grounded for a month!" when you're upset. But discipline should be designed to teach, not punish.

- **Don't give in.** If you've made a good decision, stick to it. Show your child that pleading and tantrums will not change your mind.
- **Offer choices.** Giving your middle schooler a sense of power can reduce frustration and outbursts. Say things like, "You can finish your report either before you go on a run or after. It's your decision."

**"The child supplies the power but the parents have to do the steering."**

—Dr. Benjamin Spock

# Three key skills help students prepare for college and careers

 Most middle schoolers don't know what they want to do after they graduate from high school—and that's perfectly all right.

However, your child can start strengthening some skills now that will improve chances of success in the future—whatever it may hold. These skills include:

1. **Communication.** From factory floors to hospital operating rooms, on-the-job success depends on effective communication. You can help your child develop speaking and listening skills at home. If your middle schooler wants you to change a rule, ask to see a presentation about why you should. Why does your child want to stay up later on the weekends? How has your child demonstrated responsibility to support this change?

2. **Analytical thinking** and problem solving. Middle schoolers often see things they'd like to change. There's a school policy that doesn't seem fair. The science equipment needs an upgrade, but the school lacks the budget. Instead of just listening to complaints, help your child think of ways to be part of a solution. Perhaps your child can share ideas with the principal.
3. **Decision making.** Suppose your child is wondering whether to sign up for an honors math class next year. Suggest making a T chart—putting the reasons *for* on one side and the reasons *against* on the other. Seeing the pros and cons on paper will help your middle schooler make an informed choice.

Source: B. Cook, "College and Career Ready: What It Means for Middle School Students: Helping students develop the skills they know they need to succeed," Association for Middle Level Education.

# 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—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 emphasized 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.



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# Boost your child's math skills with an imaginary stock portfolio

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Nearly every middle schooler is interested in making money. See if your child can “make” some money by playing a stock market game.


To play, follow these steps:

1. **Explain that stocks** are small pieces or *shares* of a company. If enough people are buying pieces of that company, the value of its stock will go up. But if people are selling off pieces of that company, the value of its stock will go down. Then, show where the stock prices are listed online or in the newspaper.
2. **Give your child** an imaginary amount of money to invest. Then, have your child pick several companies and decide how much

of the imaginary money to spend on each company's stock.

3. **Ask your child** to chart the prices each day. Explain that by purchasing 100 shares of a \$10 stock on the first day, your child would have \$1,000 worth of that stock. But if the stock goes up to \$11, your child would have \$1,100 worth of the stock. If it goes down to \$9, your child would have only \$900. Your child should figure out how much money was earned or lost on each stock for the entire month.
4. **Have your child** give the family a report at the end of the month. Don't forget to ask if there is anything different your child would do next time, based on this experience.

## Your words can affect your middle schooler's motivation

 The way middle schoolers hear the adults in their lives talk about them to others can have a lasting effect. It can motivate them to do their best—or discourage them from even trying.

To make sure the things you say have a positive effect:

- **Assume your child** is listening when you speak—even if your middle schooler doesn't appear to be paying attention. Kids instantly perk up their ears when they hear their names. And they pick up more than the words. Middle schoolers are mature enough to take note of the tone of voice and the context of the conversation.
- **Avoid discussing** your child's strengths and weaknesses with siblings. This only fuels rivalry.

- **Avoid making** negative comments about your middle schooler to others—especially to other family members. Think about how you would feel if two people you love talked about how lazy, messy or frustrating you were, right in front of you.
- **Congratulate** your child on academic performance, but focus on what's *really* important to you. Talk about things your child has learned, or about your child's kindness or sense of responsibility. And if you really want to motivate your middle schooler, talk about persistence. Discuss a time when your child didn't give up, even when the going got tough.

Source: S. Rimm, *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades and What You Can Do About It: A Six-Step Program for Parents and Teachers*, Great Potential Press.

**Q:** I caught my middle schooler copying all the answers from a friend's school assignment. My child said it was no big deal and that other students do it all the time. What should I do?

## Questions & Answers

**A:** Unfortunately, the pressures of middle school cause some students to turn to cheating. In middle school, students become more aware of how they compare with their peers and they may view cheating as necessary to keep up.

In one study, 90% of students admitted to copying a friend's assignment and 75% admitted to cheating on tests.

Cheating is very serious. But you can keep your child from turning one mistake into a more severe problem. Here's how:

- **Ask if working with others** was part of the assignment. If it wasn't, talk about the consequences of cheating. It's dishonest and it robs your child of learning the skills and information needed for success in life.
- **Ask why your child cheated.** Many students are worried about disappointing their families or getting punished for less-than-perfect grades.
- **Emphasize learning** more than grades. Explain that your child's best effort is what matters. Let your middle schooler know that mistakes are learning opportunities and don't affect your love.
- **Help your child** strengthen study habits. Then your student can earn higher grades without cheating.
- **Find help** if your child has fallen behind. The teacher may be able to suggest a tutoring program or a student who might work with your child.

## Preparation improves test outcomes



Tests in middle school are often more frequent, challenging and involved than they were in elementary

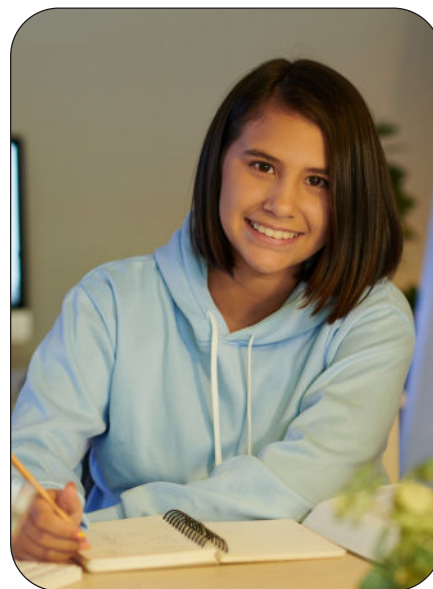
school. To help your child improve test performance, share these preparation strategies:

- **Schedule plenty of study time.** Teachers usually provide advance notice of when they plan to give a test. Your child should start studying the day the test is announced, in short sessions each day.
- **Experiment** with different studying methods. Some students like to read material aloud and then explain it to someone. Some create diagrams, posters or models. Help your child find a strategy that works best for the subject.
- **Try “chunking.”** Most students retain more when material is broken down or “chunked” into smaller pieces. Suggest making note cards with one relevant fact on each card.
- **Think like a teacher.** Encourage your child to consider: *What are the most important pieces of information in this unit? What are the concepts this unit is presenting? What parts of this unit will help me understand material that is coming up in the next unit and beyond?* Then, your child can create and take a practice test.
- **Save the last day** of studying for review. Your child shouldn't try to learn new concepts on the last day. This is cramming, and crammed material is typically forgotten as quickly as it is learned.

## Share five test-taking steps with your middle schooler

Tests aren't the only measure of learning, but they are a useful way to check students' progress. For the best results, encourage your middle schooler to follow these five test-taking steps:

1. **Read the directions carefully** and underline action words, such as *compare, list, describe, define* and *summarize*.
2. **Skim the whole test quickly.** Your child should think about how much is available to take the test and then decide how much time to spend on each question.
3. **Start working.** If the format allows, your middle schooler should answer the easy questions first, and place a check mark next to questions that will take more thought or time to answer.
4. **Go back to the checked questions** and answer each one.



5. **Double-check answers** before handing in the test. Your child should make sure the answers make sense and that there are no careless mistakes.

## A test-prep checklist keeps middle schoolers organized



Talk to middle schoolers about being organized and they probably think about keeping their rooms neat. But organization is also a way of approaching schoolwork and studying.

It's hard for students to do well on a test if they don't know when the test is, what to study or what materials they need.

In middle school, your child is expected to keep track of all this information—for each class. Few people can do this in their heads.

The solution? Have your child create a test-prep checklist and refer to it often.

For upcoming tests, your child should write down the answers to these questions:

- **What is the class?**
- **When is the test?**
- **What is the test format?**
- **What topics will be covered?**
- **What are the relevant pages** in the class reading material?
- **What materials do I need** to study—textbook, notes, past assignments and quizzes?