Middle School Parents®
still make the difference!
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Boost brain power with evidence-based strategies

Switching up where your middle schooler studies can be a game changer. While a dedicated workspace at home is great, research shows that learning in different spots actually helps students remember more of what they study.

To optimize learning and memory, encourage your child to:

- **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.
- **Vary the material** in a single study session. For example, your child might alternate studying vocabulary words and reading a history assignment. Concentrating on multiple skills in this way leaves a deeper impression on the brain.
- **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 help your child earn a passing grade. But it won't lead to real long-term learning. To the brain, a quick fill leads to a quick empty.
- **Write down a few notes** after each class. This turns passive listening into active learning, making the lesson much harder to forget.

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

Preparation leads to better conferences

When you have a meeting with one of your child's middle school teachers, use these strategies to make your time together as effective as possible:

- **Talk with your child** before the meeting. Does your child have concerns about anything—a teacher, a specific class or a big project?
- **Make a list.** Do not count on remembering everything you want to ask. Write down your questions and any notes about topics you want to cover.
- **Start on a high note.** Begin the meeting with something positive, such as, "My child really enjoyed the last project for your class." Make it clear you want to work with the teacher to help your child.
- **Develop a plan.** If a teacher brings up a problem, ask for specific steps you can both take to help fix it.
- **Schedule a follow-up.** Agree on the best way to stay in touch, such as through email, so you can check on your child's progress later.

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Stress management is essential for your child's academic success

Students under excessive stress are at risk of having difficulty focusing and remembering what they learn in class.

To help manage stress, suggest that your middle schooler:

- **Take several deep breaths.** It may sound simple, but it works. Taking time to stop and think calmly about a problem may help your child put it into perspective.
- **Focus on health.** Twenty to 30 minutes of exercise can relieve tension and clear your child's head. Eating right and getting adequate sleep every night also helps keep stress under control.
- **Keep a journal.** Some kids find that it's easier to write down their feelings than to talk about them. This is a great way to ease stress.
- **Take a break from screens.** Unplugging from the digital world gives your child time to relax, read a book, listen to music or daydream.

Source: S. Vogel and others, "Stress Affects the Neural Ensemble for Integrating New Information and Prior Knowledge," *Neuroimage*, Elsevier.

"It's not the load that breaks you down, it's the way you carry it."

—Lou Holtz

Consider tutoring to address ongoing academic struggles

If your middle schooler has been struggling in school, it may be time for some one-on-one learning support.

Getting a tutor could be the answer to your child's academic problems, especially if:

- **Schoolwork has become** a daily battle.
- **Your child's grades are dropping**.
- **The whole family is feeling** the stress of school difficulties.
- **Your child seems** to have given up on trying.

Ask your child's school counselor to recommend available tutoring resources. Then, to help your middle schooler get the most from tutoring sessions:

- **Step back.** Whether sessions are virtual or in-person, give the tutor space to do the job.
- **Provide a distraction-free setting.** Give your child and the tutor a quiet, well-lit place to work.
- **Keep a positive attitude.** Remind your child that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- **Set small, reachable goals.** Don't expect perfect grades right away. Instead, set small goals, like raising a grade by a few points each month. These small wins will show that the tutoring is working.
- **Check in regularly.** Ask your child how the sessions are going and if the tutor's teaching style matches how your child learns best.
- **Make a change if needed.** Sometimes, a specific tutor just isn't the right fit. If you don't see progress after a few months, don't be afraid to try someone new.

Source: J. Schumm, Ph.D., *How to Help Your Child with Homework,* Free Spirit Publishing.

Do you teach your child to use social media responsibly?

More and more middle schoolers are becoming active on social media platforms. It can be hard to know if they are ready for the responsibility that comes with these apps. Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out if you are helping your child stay safe online:

1. **Do you make sure** your child follows the minimum age requirements set by social media apps (usually age 13)?
2. **Do you set rules** about when, where and how long your child can use social media?
3. **Do you emphasize** the dangers of sharing personal information and engaging with strangers online?
4. **Do you discuss** why your child should never post mean comments or photos that could hurt someone?
5. **Do you make it clear** that you will monitor your child's social media accounts for safety?

How well are you doing?

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are helping your child use social media safely. For each *no* answer, try that idea from the quiz.

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Practical Ideas for Parents to Help Their Children.

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The Parent Institute, 1-800-756-5525,
P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474.
Fax: 1-800-216-3667.
Or visit: www.parent-institute.com.

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Three key skills help students prepare for college and careers

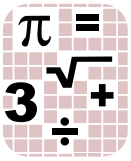
Most middle schoolers don't know what they want to do after they graduate from high school—and that's perfectly all right.

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, writing 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.

Build your child's math skills with an imaginary stock portfolio



Does your middle schooler want to learn how to make money? You can help your child practice math and learn about business with an imaginary stock market game. This hands-on activity is a great way to show your child that math is a useful tool for making real-world decisions.

Here is how to play:

1. **Explain how it works.** Tell your child that a stock share is a small piece of a company. When many people want to buy a company's shares, the price goes up. When people sell the shares, the price goes down. Show your child where to find stock prices online or in the newspaper.
2. **Start with "fake" money.** Give your child an imaginary budget to invest in a few different companies.
3. **Track the progress.** Have your child record the value of the stock each day. If your child buys 100 shares at $10 each, that equals $1,000 worth of stock. If the price goes up to $11, your child has $1,100. If it drops to $9, your child has $900.
4. **Review the results.** At the end of the month, have your child calculate the total profit or loss for each company's stock.
5. **Share the results.** Ask your child to give a presentation to the family. What did your child learn? Would your child try a different strategy next time?

Questions & Answers

Q: School has been in session for several months, and I feel like I'm not in the loop about things like upcoming assignments and tests. How can I stay informed about what my middle schooler is doing academically without seeming nosy?

A: Remember, it's your right to know how your child is doing in school, so you're not being nosy. You're being an engaged parent!

To stay informed:

- **Talk to your child.** Ask for a regular update on classes. The more you know, the more comfortable you'll feel discussing them. If your child doesn't want to talk about school every day, set aside 15 minutes for a weekly chat. It will give your student a chance to give you an update. And if there's a problem brewing, your child will have a built-in opportunity to tell you about it.
- **Read everything** the school sends home. Check the school's online communication platforms and visit the website. Follow the school and district on social media. These are the most effective ways to stay informed about changes to school policies, etc.
- **Touch base** with your child's teachers. If you haven't had an opportunity to meet them in person, send a note to each and introduce yourself. Include your phone number and email address. Ask for their contact information, as well.
- **Attend school events** and workshops when you can. It's the perfect way to connect with school staff and other families—and to find out what's going on at school!

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It Matters: Literacy Skills

Share reading strategies with your child

By middle school, students are asked do more than just reading words; they must also learn to *read for meaning.* This includes identifying the main ideas and "reading between the lines" to understand what the author implies. Unfortunately, research shows that about one in four middle schoolers struggle with these skills.

To strengthen comprehension, encourage your child to:

- **Ask questions.** Strong readers are curious. Before reading an assignment, your child should look it over and review the images and words in bold type. What questions do they raise? While reading, your child should write down any additional questions that come to mind. After reading, your child should be able to answer those questions.
- **Learn new words.** Your child should write down any unfamiliar words along with their meanings.
- **Find the main ideas.** While reading, your child should be able to identify the main points and the supporting details.
- **Work on fluency.** Being a fluent reader means reading at a comfortable pace while understanding the text. Middle schoolers should read about 100 to 160 words per minute. Select a short article and time your child reading it aloud. Then, challenge your child to read at a faster pace and still grasp the main idea.

Source: A.G. Boardman, *Effective Instruction for Adolescent Struggling Readers,* Florida Center for Reading Research.

'Brain movies' improve your child's reading comprehension

Many middle schoolers struggle to focus on what they read. An effective way to help them stay engaged and remember more is by having them creating "brain movies." Here is how to get started:

1. **Pick a descriptive story.** Choose a passage filled with sensory details, such as a scene from a science fiction novel or a nature article.
2. **Set the scene.** Look up photos online that match the setting to help your child visualize the story.
3. **Read aloud.** As you read, ask your child to imagine the story playing out like a movie.
4. **Have your child draw** a picture of a scene from the story.

Encourage your child to create brain movies for assigned reading, too. For example, before reading about the structure of a cell, ask your child to imagine shrinking down to travel inside one. What does it look like, and how does it move? Visualizing scenes helps students pay better attention to details and improves the memory of the material.

Three adjustments can keep your middle schooler reading

Middle schoolers are starting to see the world in new ways. When you recommend reading material, keep your child's progression toward young adulthood in mind. To encourage reading that feeds your child's maturing understanding of the world:

1. **Read news articles everyday.** Tap into your middle schooler's more sophisticated ability to comprehend and care about current events by sharing at least one news article of interest with your child. Challenge your student to share an article each day with you as well.
2. **Start a book club.** Ask your child to pick a book for the two of you to read and discuss. This demonstrates that you think reading is important—and that you value your child's ideas.
3. **Find books about kids** your child's age who are making a difference. Middle schoolers are beginning to think about their place in the world and the difference they can make.