

# Middle School Parents<sup>®</sup>

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## Maximize the power of your middle schooler's brain

**D**oes your child seem to be more concerned with his friends than he is with what he's learning? Is he acting silly one minute and feeling overwhelmed the next?

If so, your child is a typical middle schooler. Brain research sheds some light on the behaviors that worry parents (or drive them crazy). Your child acts this way because, like all adolescents, his emotional brain develops faster than his rational brain.

Over the next few years, you will witness swings in your child's emotions. However, if you engage his emotional brain, you will also be able to maximize his ability to learn. Here's how:

- **Use humor.** Middle schoolers love to laugh and make jokes. Encourage your child to find funny cartoons,

GIFs or videos about what he's learning. They can satisfy his desire to laugh and help him learn at the same time.

- **Make learning personal.** Middle schoolers tend to think the world revolves around them. So, link what your child is learning to his life. If he is studying the Revolutionary War, ask him to think about a time he felt like revolting against authority.
- **Promote imagination.** Help your child put his imagination to work when he is studying. Ask him questions like, "What would it have felt like to be there with George Washington at Valley Forge?"

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

## Nutrition affects your child's ability to learn



It's no surprise that a healthy diet can help your middle schooler stay alert during class and retain the information she learns.

Unfortunately, simply stocking your home with nutritious foods doesn't necessarily mean your child will eat them—especially if you aren't home during the day to offer them.

So what's the solution? Help your child become an informed eater who knows how to make responsible food choices on her own. Here's how:

- **Expose your child** to a variety of foods. Plan your weekly meals together and set a goal of trying one new healthy food each week.
- **Remove temptations.** Get rid of soda and junk food. Instead, fill your fridge with easy-to-grab washed, cut veggies and fruit.
- **Make it easy for your child** to drink plenty of water. Hydration is key to brain function. Give her a large water bottle to drink from throughout the day.
- **Insist on breakfast.** Offer foods high in fiber and low in added sugar. A whole-grain bagel and a banana is a fast and easy breakfast option.

# Prior knowledge helps kids understand and relate to text



Research shows that your child's ability to understand and relate to what she reads is linked to what she knows before she opens the book. This is called *prior knowledge*.

Having some knowledge before reading means your child will not have to try to figure out the text only from the information in front of her. Prior knowledge of a topic may also keep her more engaged in what she's reading.

To increase your child's knowledge:

- **Encourage her to read** news articles. They will expose her to topics and themes that she will likely encounter in her schoolwork.

- **Expand her world.** Watch educational programs and visit historic sites. Your child's experiences may help her make a connection to something she'll read in the future.
- **Share your experiences.** Talk with your child about places you have been or jobs you have had.

**Source:** K. Allan and M. Miller, *Literacy and Learning: Strategies for Middle and Secondary School Teachers*, Houghton Mifflin.

**“Develop a passion for learning. If you do, you will never cease to grow.”**

—Anthony J. D'Angelo

# Three ways you can support your middle schooler's education



When your child was younger, you may have volunteered in his class, hovered as he did his homework each night and forged close ties with his school. But now that he's growing and changing, your approach to school involvement needs to change, too.

Studies show that middle schoolers benefit from parents being involved in their schooling. But, during the middle school years, some things parents do at home are twice as effective at supporting their children's schooling as, say, chaperoning a class trip or volunteering in the classroom.

Research shows three things families can do are especially effective:

- 1. Communicate your expectations.** Simply telling your child that you expect him to work hard and know he will go far in school can be a powerful motivator.

- 2. Expand on what's being taught.** Talk to your child about the concepts he is learning every day. Then, brainstorm together about related activities. Encouraging your child to take what he's learning in school (such as math) and apply it to his everyday life (such as sticking to a shopping budget) can help him see why education matters.

- 3. Talk about the future.** Does your child want to be an architect, a mechanic or a fashion designer? Help him investigate the education and training necessary to prepare for careers that interest him. Encourage him to find schools that offer the training he'll need. Remind your middle schooler that, while his plans may change, a solid education is his ticket to achieving any goal.

**Source:** D. Viadero, "Scholars: Parent-School Ties Should Shift in Teen Years," *Education Week*.

# Do you encourage your child to spend time reading?



Reading for pleasure helps students build valuable comprehension and vocabulary skills. But many middle schoolers say they just don't have time to read.

Are you encouraging your child to make time for reading? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

- 1. Do you keep** all types of reading material around the house? Include magazines, newspapers, books, manuals, catalogs—anything with words!
- 2. Do you visit** your local library in person or online? Many have created “grab and go” options in response to the pandemic.
- 3. Do you link** reading to your child's interests by sharing books and articles on topics that are important to him?
- 4. Do you set** a good example by reading in front of your child and talking about the things you read?
- 5. Do you have** a regular time for family reading?

**How well are you doing?**

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are strongly encouraging your middle schooler to read. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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# Tutoring might be the answer to ongoing academic struggles



Adjusting to the new normal of learning has been challenging for today's students. If your child is struggling in one or more of her classes, she may need some one-on-one learning support.

Getting a tutor could be the answer to your middle schooler's academic problems—especially if:

- **Schoolwork** has become a daily battle.
- **Your child's grades** are slipping more by the day.
- **The entire family** is feeling the stress of her school difficulties.

Ask your child's school counselor to recommend tutoring resources. She may even be able to connect you with local high school students who tutor.

Then, to help your middle schooler get the most from tutoring sessions:

- **Stand back.** Whether sessions are virtual or in-person, don't pitch in. Give the tutor space to do the job.
- **Provide a distraction-free setting.** Be sure there is a quiet, well-lit place for your child and the tutor to work.
- **Set reachable goals.** Don't expect your middle schooler to earn straight A's right after she begins tutoring sessions. Instead, set smaller goals, such as raising her English grade a few percentage points per month. Meeting these goals may be your best indicator as to whether the tutoring is working.
- **Don't be afraid to make a change.** Not every tutor-student relationship works out. If your child isn't meeting her goals after a few months, it may be time to try something new.

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

# Start talking to your child about the transition to high school



A big transition is ahead for many middle schoolers and their parents. High school is a mere six months away! You and your child may be nervous—especially with the uncertainty that the pandemic has brought to learning environments.

Most middle schoolers:

- **Feel excitement** about the opportunities high school offers. These include new friendships and more freedom. High school also lets students pursue new interests through a broader range of classes.
  - **Feel nervous.** High school standards for academics, behavior and independence are far beyond what most middle schoolers are used to. There will likely be more students, too.
- To ease your child's anxiety:
- **Tap available resources.** Encourage your child to talk to his school counselor and ask any questions he may have. He should also talk to neighbors or friends who are already in high school and ask about their experiences. Be sure to attend orientation sessions offered by the high school.
  - **Talk to your child.** Share some of your own positive high school memories. Discuss the classes your child wants to take and how he will manage his schedule.
  - **Encourage your child.** Starting high school is a huge milestone. Your child is growing up. Let him know you are proud of him and are looking forward to this new stage.

**Q:** For safety's sake, we won't be traveling over spring break and my child is disappointed. I have taken the week off from work, but we're staying home. How can we make the most of our week off without breaking the bank?

## Questions & Answers

**A:** Due to COVID-19, chances are that most families won't be traveling. However, they might as well be—at least in your child's mind. And while you don't need to provide expensive activities when it comes to spring break, it is wise to plan a few entertaining things to do together during your week off.

Here are some low-cost yet fun ideas to get you started:

- **Be tourists at home.** What draws visitors to your region? Is there an historic battleground or natural wonder? A beautiful state park? Whatever it is, you probably don't spend enough time enjoying it. During spring break, try seeing your hometown with fresh eyes. Grab your child and explore your area's attractions together.
- **Shadow a professional.** Does your child love animals? See if you can arrange a day where she can volunteer or observe at a nearby veterinary clinic.
- **Make one day** a "vacation day." For 24 hours, give your child a break from chores and rules (within reason). Let her sleep in, stay up late or watch a bunch of age-appropriate movies.
- **Visit a nearby college.** No need to schedule a formal tour, just walk around campus. If local colleges are closed to visitors, you can tour them online together.



# It Matters: Test Success

## Preparation is the key to better results



Tests in middle school are often more frequent, challenging and abstract than they were in elementary school. To help your child improve his test performance, share these preparation strategies:

- **Schedule plenty of study time.** Teachers usually provide advance notice, sometimes up to a week, of when they plan to give a test. Your child should start studying the day the test is announced.
- **Experiment** with different methods when studying. He can read material aloud and then explain it to you. He could create a diagram, poster or model.
- **Try “chunking.”** Most students learn best when material is broken down or “chunked” into smaller pieces. Your child can make note cards with only one relevant fact on each card.
- **Think like a teacher.** Your child should ask himself several questions: *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?*
- **Create a list** of the important facts and concepts. He can use it to make up practice tests for himself.
- **Save the last day** of studying for review. He should not try to learn new concepts on the last day. This is cramming, and crammed material is typically forgotten as quickly as it is learned.

## Teach your middle schooler strategies to use during tests

Tests certainly aren't the only measure of learning, but they are a useful way to check students' progress. And, your child will earn higher grades if she can do well on them.

Encourage your child to:

1. **Read the directions carefully** and underline direction words, such as *compare, list, describe, define* and *summarize*.
2. **Skim the whole test quickly.** She should think about how much time she has and decide how much time to spend on each question.
3. **Start working.** She should answer the questions she knows first and place check marks next to questions she needs to come back to.
4. **Go back to the checked questions** and answer each to the best of her ability.
5. **Double-check her answers** before she submits them. She should make sure her answers make sense and that she has not made careless mistakes.



## Encourage your child to create a test-prep checklist



Talk to your middle schooler about being organized and he probably thinks about keeping his room neat.

But organization is also a building block for his academic success.

It will be hard for him to do well on a test if he doesn't know when the test is, what to study or what materials he needs.

In middle school, your child is expected to keep track of all this information—multiplied by the number of classes he is taking.

Few people can do this in their heads. He needs to 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 textbook?**
- **What materials do I need to study—textbook, notes, past assignments and quizzes?**