

Middle School Parents

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still make the difference!



Five reasons middle schoolers should make time for reading

Middle schoolers typically spend more time on homework than they did when they were in elementary school. With the increased workload, reading for pleasure may be pretty far down on their list of priorities.

Your child may think that she reads a lot for school and that should be enough. She's wrong! Here are five reasons your middle schooler should make time for pleasure reading:

- 1. Reading can make her an expert.** Reading is the best way for your child to learn as much as possible about her areas of interest.
- 2. Reading can take her places.** Few people can afford to travel every place they'd like to go. But your child can always travel through a

book. And she can gain knowledge to help her set goals to get there in person someday.

- 3. Reading can make her laugh.** Appreciating the humor in books helps your child develop thinking skills. It also improves her own sense of humor.
- 4. Reading can turn her into a detective.** A winter day on break is a perfect time for your child to grab a cup of hot chocolate and dive into a great mystery.
- 5. Reading can introduce her to people like herself.** In books that feature characters her age, your child is likely to encounter people that think the way she does and have the same issues she is facing.

Writing letters helps your child build vital skills



Middle schoolers are more likely to send a text than to sit down and write a good old-fashioned

letter. Yet letter writing is still a very useful skill. Writing letters helps middle schoolers:

- **Practice** sentence structure, grammar and punctuation.
- **Strengthen** memory and storytelling skills. Most people share their experiences when they write letters.
- **Boost** social skills, especially if the letter is a thank-you note.

Here are three strategies to get your child writing:

- 1. Keep a writing basket** in a visible spot. Fill it with everything someone would need to write a letter—paper, pens, envelopes, stamps and an address book.
- 2. Challenge your child** to write one letter every week. And if he says he has no one to write to, remind him that any relative would love to get mail from him.
- 3. Collect postcards** when your family visits new places. Ask your child to write about his experiences and send the cards to relatives and friends.

Help your middle schooler start thinking about the future



College is years away, but that doesn't mean your child shouldn't start thinking about it and making plans for it now.

Studies show that college graduates are more likely than non-graduates to:

- **Live healthier, longer lives.**
- **Stay employed.**
- **Enjoy their jobs.**
- **Change jobs more easily.**
- **Earn significantly higher salaries.**

To help your child begin focusing on higher education:

- **Talk about his interests.** What does your child like to do? What are his passions? Whether it's graphic design or physical fitness, there's surely a college program geared toward it. He won't be enrolling anytime soon, but it's OK to "plant the seed" and get him thinking about how he can continue doing what he loves at the university level someday.

- **Encourage him to set goals.** How does your child see himself in 10 years? As a college graduate? A successful executive? Ask him what he envisions and how he plans to get there. Specifically, talk about what he can do now (such as studying harder or taking tougher classes) to help him reach his goals.
- **Widen his horizons.** There are too many careers to count, and odds are your child hasn't heard of many of them. So go online and research various professions. Get him excited about the different options available to him!

"The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."

—Eleanor Roosevelt

Don't fall into the trap of being your middle schooler's friend



Your child is growing up before your eyes and may look more like a young adult than a young child. But remember: She is

still your child and not your peer. She needs you to be the parent—and you need her to respect you and your rules.

To avoid falling into the friend trap:

- **Require your child** to be respectful to you and other adults. Don't continue a conversation with her if she is being rude. Walk away and agree to talk to her when she is ready to speak respectfully.
- **Insist that your child** continue to follow your rules. Middle schoolers

don't need a long list of rules—just a few important ones that *must* be followed.

- **Don't try to be the "cool parent"** in the neighborhood. You should be kind and caring to your child and her friends, but you are not "one of the girls." Children lose respect for parents who act like children.
- **Do not make decisions** based on what would please your child and her friends. They might like it if you paid for them all to see an R-rated movie, but is it a wise parenting choice? Trust yourself as the adult and make decisions accordingly.

Do you know how to talk about the tough issues?



Middle schoolers often face some pretty tough situations—from being offered alcohol to feeling

pressured by a friend to skip a class. Are you helping your child face difficult issues head on?

Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

___ **1. Do you talk about** the difficult situations your child may face *before* they occur?

___ **2. Do you role-play** different ways to say *no*? "My mom would kill me!" is a favorite standby.

___ **3. Have you told** your child you expect honesty—especially about serious issues?

___ **4. Do you communicate** your values to your child? Remember: Values are *caught*, not *taught*.

___ **5. Do you create** everyday opportunities to talk with your child? Casual conversations often pave the way for more serious talks.

How well are you doing?

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are having positive talks with your child about tough issues. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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Sitting still during homework time can be challenging for kids



If your child can't seem to sit still during homework time, it's probably because he can't! And if he can't seem to stop snacking, it's probably because he needs that food.

Your middle schooler is entering adolescence. And this marks the biggest period of physical change he has experienced since infancy.

Middle schoolers often:

- **Get up out of their chairs.** As adolescents grow, their bones (including their tailbones) begin to harden. Sitting too long can cause nerve pain. Getting up is a natural defense against that discomfort. Your child may want to try doing some of his homework standing up. Or he could study vocabulary words as he walks around the house.

- **Fidget.** Even if they manage to stay seated, middle schoolers spend lots of time fidgeting. In adolescence, bone growth outpaces muscle growth, meaning kids' muscles are constantly being tugged and pulled. This causes so-called "growing pains." Stretching can help relieve them, so encourage regular stretch breaks during homework time.
- **Raid the refrigerator.** It's not just kids' bones and muscles that are growing. Their stomachs are, too—and it takes more food to fill them. Not only that, but all that physical growth requires serious amounts of fuel. Stock up on healthy snacks and let your child munch while he's studying.

Source: P. Lorain, "Squirming Comes Naturally to Middle School Students," National Education Association, niscw.com/mid_squirm.

A five-step process can help your child make better decisions



Want your middle schooler to make more responsible decisions? Encourage her to rely on this five-step process whenever she's faced with a dilemma:

- 1. Assess the situation.** Your child can't make a wise decision if the issue at hand seems murky. So remind her to clearly define it by asking herself, "What's the main thing I'm concerned about?"
- 2. Explore her options.** What are some ways your child could handle the problem? Have her make a mental list, then narrow it down to the three most sensible choices. This list-making step is critical because it illustrates that there are usually several options for solving a problem.
- 3. Consider the disadvantages.** Have your child think about the cons of each of her top three ideas. If a certain option has a particularly serious consequence, this is a good time to rule out that option.
- 4. Consider the advantages.** Now ask your child to figure out the pros of her top choices. Does one option have major advantages over others? Then that may be the winner.
- 5. Decide on a solution.** Now that she's weighed the pros and cons of each possible option, your child can make her decision with confidence.

Source: R. Burke, Ph.D. and others, *Common Sense Parenting: Using Your Head as Well as Your Heart to Raise School-Aged Children*, Boys Town Press.

Q: I know that attendance is important, but we're traveling over the holidays, and my seventh grader will miss a week of school. How can I keep him from falling behind?

Questions & Answers

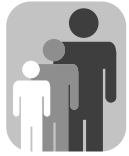
A: First, take a look at your itinerary. Is it possible to alter your plans so your trip falls within the school's break? That's the only way to ensure your child won't miss out on important learning.

If your travel dates are written in stone, though, here are three things you can do to help your middle schooler stay on top of things:

- 1. Talk to his teachers.** Well in advance, explain the situation to each of them. If they're planning to assign readings or worksheets right after break, see if your child can get started now. Find out which teachers maintain updated classroom websites, and see if your child can follow each day's lesson from afar. But keep in mind: Teachers are under no obligation to adjust to your vacation schedule.
- 2. Focus on learning** while you are away. Look at your trip as a learning opportunity. Explore museums and cultural or historical attractions and discuss them as a family. Try to immerse your child in educational activities he might not get at home.
- 3. Set aside time** for reading and writing. Even if your child has no official work to complete while he's away, insist he read for pleasure and write about his trip in a notebook. A vacation from school should not be a vacation from learning!

It Matters: Building Character

Recognizing bullying isn't always easy



You may think it is easy for children to recognize bullying. But in the social structure of middle school,

it is not so simple. That's because middle school students tend to be much more forgiving if the bully is one of the popular students.

As you talk with your child about bullying, encourage her to:

- **Focus less** on *who* is bullying and more on what is actually happening. Are the actions hurtful? Are the words meant to cause a person sadness, fear or embarrassment? If so, it's bullying—even if the person who is doing it is someone everybody likes, and the victim is someone who doesn't have many friends.
- **Think about** how she would feel if she were in the victim's place. Would it make a difference to her if the person bullying her were a popular student? Or would she be hurt no matter who the bully was? Encouraging your child to "walk in another's shoes" is an important step toward building empathy.
- **React appropriately.** Your child should *never* be a bystander. Standing by and watching—or worse, laughing along with the bully—is almost as harmful as the actual bullying itself. Your child should ask the bully to stop or slip away and tell an adult immediately.

Source: *Bullying—Engaging Parents, Students and Staff in Your Anti-Bullying Program*, The Parent Institute.

Talk to your child about the value of being dependable

Dependability is vital to your child's success in life. It matters little how talented or smart someone is if that person cannot be counted on. It is the person who shows up on time and puts forth effort who will be considered for advancement.

Encourage your child to:

- **Do what he says he will do.** At school, he should turn his work in on time. If he is part of a group, whether in a class or in an extra-curricular activity, he should do his part. Others may succeed or fail based on whether he pulls his weight.
- **Make amends.** Everyone makes mistakes. It's part of life. But your child should also try to correct his errors. If he lets someone down, he should say: "I'm sorry. I won't let it happen again. How can I make it up to you?"



- **Be cheerful.** Showing up and doing the job is important. But if your child does it while scowling and muttering under his breath, he likely won't be asked again. And that's how wonderful opportunities are missed.

A positive attitude is the key to success in and out of school



A positive attitude can motivate your child to put in the effort she needs in order to succeed—

and can keep her going even when she feels like giving up.

To foster a positive attitude in your middle schooler:

- **Tell her to focus** on the things she can change. A negative attitude often results from feeling helpless. For example, your child probably can't change the material in her classes. If that were her goal, she

would feel helpless and negative. But she *can* change how much she prepares. That can lead to success and a positive feeling of empowerment.

- **Encourage her to think** of others. It's amazing how doing something good for another person can lift a person out of a bad mood. In this season of giving, challenge your child to bring a smile to someone else's face.
- **Ask her to keep** a positivity journal. In it, she can write about things that bring her happiness.