

Helping Students Learn®

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



November 2020

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Support learning in every class with simple activities at home

Education is a partnership between schools, students and families. By supporting your middle schooler's learning, you make a big difference to his success. Here are some important ways you can reinforce your child's developing academic skills:

- **Ask about what he is doing** in each of his classes. Find out what he thinks about school and how the year is going.
- **Make him the teacher.** Ask your child to explain something he is studying to you. Presenting the material in an understandable way helps him sort it out in his own mind.
- **Encourage critical thinking.** Discuss the similarities and differences between his teachers and his classes. Ask for your child's advice about a problem you are facing at home or work.
- **Show respect for his abilities.** Let your child use his knowledge and skills to help you. The next time your phone starts giving you trouble, for example, hand it to him and see if he can figure out a solution.
- **Have conversations together** about everything—local news, scientific breakthroughs, things you care about. Really listen to what he says.
- **Expose him to new things.** Every meaningful experience your child has—from a nature hike to a virtual museum visit—has an impact on his learning. Help him relate what he sees to what he is learning.



Provide guidance for setting goals

Your child has likely done enough work for her classes so far that you both have an idea of her strengths and where she needs to improve. Help her use that knowledge to set some learning goals for the rest of the school year.

Goals motivate students more when they set them for themselves. To guide your child through the process, encourage her to:

- **Be realistic.** Improving everything all at once may not be possible. Help her identify the most important needs.
- **Write her goals down.** In one study, people who wrote down their goals were 33 percent more

successful in achieving them than others who didn't.

- **Plan.** What specific steps will she take? Will she need help? How can she get it?
- **Track her progress,** and make changes if necessary. At the end of the quarter, she can renew unmet goals and set new ones as needed.

Source: M. Price-Mitchell Ph.D., "Goal-Setting Is Linked to Higher Achievement," *Psychology Today*, [niswc.com/mid_setgoals](https://www.niswc.com/mid_setgoals).

Easier isn't always better

A recent study found that students often think study strategies that seem easy are more effective, and so they rely on them. In fact, strategies that involve more work for students—such as solving practice problems or quizzing themselves rather than simply rereading—usually lead to better recall.

Remind your child that just because learning something takes effort, it doesn't mean he isn't getting it. A little struggle may just lead to a better outcome.

Source: A. Duckworth, "What New Research Says About How to Improve Students' Study Habits," *Education Week*, [niswc.com/studyhard](https://www.niswc.com/studyhard).

Three tips sharpen writing

To help your middle schooler improve her writing skills, make sure she takes time to:



1. **Read her work aloud.** Have her listen for awkward sentences and fix them.
2. **Edit.** She should rearrange, tighten, expand or clarify points that need it.
3. **Read widely and often.** Frequent exposure to examples of solid writing by others will help her strengthen her own.

Manage math challenges

As the math your child is learning

gets more complex, he may find it more challenging. Encourage him to:



- **Make the most** of class time by taking notes and reading along with handouts.
- **Review his notes** every day.
- **Refer to the textbook.** He can look for similar sample problems and read explanations of how to solve them.
- **Watch a demonstration.** He can look online for a video or ask a classmate to walk him through problem-solving steps.

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How should I handle it when my child puts things off?

Q: My eighth grader often waits until the last minute to start assignments and projects. She has turned things in late several times. How can I help her break this self-sabotaging habit?

A: The truth is that time management doesn't come naturally to most middle schoolers. Your child needs your help to learn to plan ahead.

Show your daughter how to:

- **Get organized.** Insist that she keep her school materials and study area neat. Have her do a general tidy up once a week and sort and file papers.
- **Prioritize.** Encourage your child to list everything she has to do under one of three headings: "Must Do," "Would Be Nice to Do" and "Can Skip This." Remind her that items on the must do list (like schoolwork) have to come first.
- **Make a schedule.** Your child needs to figure out when she can actually do those must dos. Some kids can create a schedule for the week and stay on track. Others need to make one every day. Encourage your child to build in some extra time for things that take longer than she expects.
- **Stick to the schedule.** This may be the hardest step. Encourage and praise your child for getting things done. And make sure she has some time in her schedule for fun!



Are you teaching your child to be kind?

The middle school years can be full of social drama. When meanness and bullying are involved, students and learning suffer. Are you encouraging your child to be kind? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

1. **Do you set** an example by treating your child and others with kindness and respect?
2. **Do you make** it clear that "Treat others as you would like to be treated" is a value your family lives by?
3. **Do you help** your child feel empathy? "Remember how you felt when Henry did that to you?"
4. **Do you encourage** your child to be friends with all kinds of students, and not just those who are like him?

5. **Do you praise** your child when you see him being kind to others?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are planting the seeds of kindness in your child. For each no, try that idea.

"Always stop to think whether your fun may not be the cause of another's unhappiness."

—Aesop

Promote learning readiness

Your child will get more out of each class if she is prepared to learn from the start. Encourage her to:

- **Review the work** from the previous class meeting.
- **Preview the material** for that day's class.
- **Think of questions** she'd like to ask in order to understand the material.

Insist on academic honesty

"Everybody does it." Studies on cheating show that many students believe academic dishonesty is so common that they have to cheat themselves just to keep up.

More than half of all middle schoolers cheat on tests and assignments. And technology makes it easier than ever. Kids take pictures of tests and text them to kids in other classes. They copy from online sources. They use apps to solve math problems they were supposed to work themselves.

Make it clear to your child that cheating in any form is always wrong—no matter who does it or why. Let him know that you expect honesty from him at all times, whether he's at home or at school.

Source: A. Simmons, "Why Students Cheat—and What to Do About It," Edutopia, niscw.com/nocheating.

Offer help that really helps

By middle school, many parents no longer feel comfortable or confident about helping with schoolwork. But you are still a valuable resource! Help your child:

1. **Organize.**
2. **Plan.**
3. **Study.**
4. **Clarify.**



Just let her do the actual assignments herself. If she's still confused, have her write down her questions and ask the teacher.

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