

By GreatSchools Staff

"Be sure to study for the test on Friday," one of your child's teachers is certain to say some day soon.

Does your child know how?

While many teachers spend some class time teaching study skills, students often need more guidance than they get in the classroom. In middle school, there's more homework, it becomes more difficult and it requires analytical skills your child may not have developed yet.

The study skills your child needs to do well on her test on Friday are the same ones she will need to succeed in high school and college: getting organized, taking good notes and studying effectively.

As your child moves toward independence, she's less likely to ask for your advice. She will need to go through some trial and error to come up with the strategies most compatible with her learning style. And you'll want to encourage her to take responsibility for her own school work. You can help her by monitoring homework, asking questions and helping her evaluate what works for her — and what doesn't.

Helping your child get organized

Getting organized is crucial for your child, says Linda Winburn, a veteran South Carolina middle school teacher who became the state's 2005 Teacher of the Year. "And the key is parent involvement."

Some tips to help your child get organized:

Provide a place to study.

It doesn't have to be a desk, says Winburn. "A kitchen counter is a great place, especially if mom's in the kitchen cooking."

The desk or table surface should be big enough so that your student can spread out papers and books. Make sure essential supplies such as pens, paper and calculator are close by. Have good lighting and a sturdy chair that's the right height available.

Help your child develop a system to keep track of important papers.

If your child tends to forget to turn in homework or can't quite keep track of how he's doing in a class, it might help to get him a binder with a folder in the front for completed work ready to be turned in and a folder in the back for papers returned by the teacher.

"For me, staying organized meant creating a system — any system — and sticking to it," says Gabriela Kipnis, now a student at the University of Pennsylvania. "I had fun color-coding, organizing and using dividers, but the truth is, all that mattered was that there was a method that I stuck with."

Make sure your child has — and uses — a planner to keep track of assignments.

Help your child get in the habit of writing down each daily assignment in each subject and checking it off when it's complete. Some schools provide these to students, and if not, you might want to work with your PTA or parent organization to provide planners at your school.

Encourage your child to estimate how long each assignment will take.

He can then plan a realistic schedule, building in study breaks after subjects that are most challenging, and allowing for soccer games and band practice. Helping your child keep track of time spent studying — rather than staring at a blank page — will help him think about how he's using his time. If he's spending too much time on a subject that might be a signal that he needs extra help or tutoring.

Help your child break big projects into smaller ones.

A big research project will seem less overwhelming and will be less likely to be left until the last minute if it's done in manageable chunks, each with its own deadline.

Communicate with your child's teachers.

If your child is struggling with organizational skills, talk to the school counselor or teachers about what might be causing the problems and brainstorm approaches to solve them.

"Did you do your homework?"

Parents need to ask more questions than this one, teachers advise. How much should you help with homework? Monitor homework but remember it's your child's homework, not yours. You can help by asking questions that help guide your child to his own solutions. Some examples:

- What information do you need to do this assignment?
- Where are you going to look for it?
- Where do you think you should begin?
- What do you need to do next?
- Can you describe how you're going to solve this problem?
- How did you solve this problem?
- What did you try that didn't work?
- Why does this answer seem right to you?
- Tell me more about this part?

Studying for tests

Studying for tests is a skill. For struggling students, it's a mystery.

"Unsuccessful test takers don't know where the questions come from," says Jim Burke, a California high school English teacher and the author of a number of books about teaching and learning. "The kids who don't succeed tend to think the others are lucky."

Parents can help their children manage their time and attention — which means turning off the cell phone, the TV and the iPod, says Burke.

Some tips to remember in helping your child:

Rereading isn't the same as learning.

"Reviewing alone is not enough, says Kipnis, the UPenn student, reflecting on what she has learned along the way. "Thinking of potential essay questions and outlining them or working out the challenging math problems helps me learn how to apply the material so that I do not blank when I see the questions on the test."

"For math and sciences, a big problem that I had was that I would spend a lot of time reviewing the concepts, but I wouldn't learn them because I was not practicing applying the concepts," she says. "I was the most productive when I created sheets with tons of practice problems and just practiced applying the concept in many different ways."

There are other ways your student can practice this kind of active learning - highlighting his notes, using Post-its to mark key textbook passages, making study cards, and mapping and diagramming concepts.

People are productive at different times of day.

Some people focus better in the morning, others at night. Help your child find the times that his efforts will be most effective.

Sometimes we just have to memorize.

You may have used a mnemonic like Roy G. Biv to remember the colors of the rainbow (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet) or My Very Educated Mother Just Sent Us Nine Pizzas to remember the correct order of the planets, back when Pluto was still considered the ninth one. Inventing your own silly mnemonic together works just as well and can lighten up a study session.

Help your child make the most of his time.

If she carries a review sheet or book along with her, sitting in the doctor's waiting room or waiting out a traffic jam can be productive study time. That leaves more time for a basketball game after school.

Make sure your child knows the basics.

Find out the skills students at your child's grade level are expected to have. Middle school students are generally expected to have learned basic multiplication and division facts, for example. If your child can't quickly recall them, it is likely to hurt her scores on math tests.

Look for other sources of support.

Find out the best way to reach your child's teachers and keep that contact information handy all year. Is there a college student in your neighborhood who can help with math, a relative who can tutor him in Spanish? Talk to your child about finding a "study buddy" or group. Study groups can be effective because students can fill in the gaps in each other's knowledge and test their understanding of the material by explaining it to others.

Reflect on what works.

Some questions you can ask your child: How do you know when you've studied enough? How did you keep yourself focused? How much time did you plan to spend and how much did you actually spend? How would you do this differently next time?

Help your child destress.

Good study skills can help reduce anxiety, and so can relaxation exercises and regular physical activity. If your child seems unusually anxious about tests, talk to him about it. If the work seems too difficult for your child or the workload too great, contact the school.

"Have a conversation with the teacher," says Winburn, the South Carolina teacher. "Maybe the child doesn't need to be doing 100 problems to practice a concept. Maybe 10 is just fine."