

# Middle School Parents<sup>®</sup>

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*still make the difference!*



## Regular family meals support well-being and school success

**W**hat does your middle schooler really want for dinner? *You.* Families live busy lives and you may wonder whether gathering for a family meal is worth all the hassle. Well, it is. In fact, family meals can make a difference to your child's school success.

Studies have found that kids who eat dinner with their families four or more nights a week are less likely to try cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana. They also perform better in school.

To make family meals work for you:

- **Don't beat yourself up** if you can't eat together every night. Try to have dinner together a few times each week.
- **Include your child** in mealtime conversations. Ask a few specific questions. Instead of the standard

"How was your day?" ask for specifics. "What's one interesting thing that happened at school?" Then try to keep the conversation going.

- **Keep it pleasant.** Don't use mealtime as an opportunity to argue or interrogate your child.
- **Laugh.** Humor makes dinnertime fun for everyone.
- **Be flexible.** If evening meals are hard to schedule, share breakfast with your child. You'll have the same chance to connect.
- **Go low-tech.** Don't try to compete with digital devices for your child's attention. You'll lose. Turn off the TV and keep phones and tablets away from the table.

**Source:** "Benefits of Family Dinners," The Family Dinner Project.

## Help your child adopt some healthy habits



Healthy habits make it easier for children to do well in school. Do you know if your child is getting the

nutrition, sleep and exercise kids this age need? Health experts agree that middle schoolers need to:

- **Get enough sleep.** The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends between nine and 10 hours of sleep each night for peak performance in school.
- **Focus on nutrition.** Children should eat a healthy breakfast every morning and make nutritious choices for school lunches and snacks.
- **Drink plenty of water.** Brains can't store water, but they need it to work properly. Staying hydrated is one way kids can keep their brains sharp.
- **Make exercise a habit.** PE class isn't enough! Adolescents need 60 minutes of physical activity every day—biking, running, shooting hoops, playing a sport, dancing, walking, etc.
- **Wash their hands regularly.** Hand-washing is an essential part of preventing the spread of many illnesses. And fewer illnesses lead to fewer school absences.

# Make the most of parent-teacher conferences in middle school



In middle school, you may have to ask for a parent-teacher conference. To get the most from a meeting with your child's teacher:

- **Make a list** of things you'd like to discuss ahead of time. Include questions and information about your child that you'd like the teacher to know.
- **Be prompt.** Teachers often schedule conferences back-to-back. Arriving late may delay the meetings after yours.
- **Keep an open mind.** Your goal is to work as a team with your child's teachers. Even if a teacher says something you disagree with, listen carefully before stating your view.

- **Clarify and summarize** as you go. If you don't understand something the teacher says, just ask.
- **Ask the teacher** how you can support your child. If your student is doing well, ask what you can do to keep things on a positive track. If there are problems, ask what you can do to help.
- **Take notes.** This will help you remember what you discussed.

**“Unity is strength ... when there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved.”**

—Mattie Stepanek

# Encourage your child to use a journal to plan for the future



It's not realistic to expect middle schoolers to know what they want to do for the rest of their lives. But it is realistic for them to have some sense of what they like and what they don't, what they are good at and what they struggle with.

Experts agree that it is helpful for middle school students to begin thinking this way. Children who know themselves have a head start on the future.

Keeping a journal is an effective way for middle schoolers to get to know themselves better. They can write about what they think as well as what they do.

In the journal, your child should answer questions such as:

- *What are my strengths in school?*
- *What are my weaknesses in school?*
- *What do I love doing outside school?*
- *What am I good at doing outside school?*
- *What do I like to learn about or would I like to learn more about?*
- *What is important to me right now?*
- *Do I prefer to work with others or alone?*
- *Am I happier when I am indoors or outdoors?*
- *What have I done in my life that I am most proud of?*

Encourage your child to update the journal regularly. The answers are likely to change—and that's OK. Your child should pay more attention to the things that stay the same. These trends could provide clues to future success.

# Are you stressing the value of your child's effort?



Every student is capable of their own “personal best.” Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out if you are encouraging your child's best effort:

- \_\_\_ **1. Do you point out effort?** “I'm impressed that you decided to stay home from the movies to work on your paper this weekend!”
- \_\_\_ **2. Do you encourage** your child to take pride in having a strong work ethic? “It must feel great to know that you worked so hard on your project.”
- \_\_\_ **3. Do you point to effort** as the reason for your child's successes? “That extra 30 minutes of studying each night has really paid off.”
- \_\_\_ **4. Do you avoid** focusing too much on the results, results when you see that your child is trying hard?
- \_\_\_ **5. Do you model** consistent and diligent effort? “I am working on my report for work each day this week so I can get it completed by Friday.”

**How well are you doing?**

If most of your answers are *yes*, you are encouraging your child to work hard to do well. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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# Five strategies can reduce your middle schooler's test anxiety



Does your child's stomach do flip-flops the night before a huge test? Does yours? Relax! Although you can't take

the test for your child, there are lots of ways you can offer support.

When your middle schooler has an upcoming test:

- 1. Sit down and talk.** Ask why your child is so nervous about the test. Is the material too hard? Does your child not understand it? Sometimes just sharing concerns can make a test seem less scary.
- 2. Encourage your child** to find out what format the test will be. Essay? multiple choice? True or false? Knowing the format will help your child feel more prepared.
- 3. Help your child** make a study schedule. If the test is next week,

your middle schooler should set aside study time on each of the days leading up to it. This reduces the need to cram the night before.

- 4. Create a comfy study spot.** Help your child find a quiet well-lit place to study. When it's time to hit the books, make sure your child has needed supplies—including a healthy snack.
- 5. Talk about your child's strengths.** "I know you're worried about the big science test, but remember how well you did on the last one?" Focus on the positives.

Later, when your middle schooler receives the test grade, talk about it. Celebrate success and calmly go over anything that went wrong. Talk about what your child can do to improve next time.

# Create a family media plan to manage recreational screen time



According to one study, kids who spend seven hours or more per day in front of a screen are more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression or anxiety than those who spend just one hour per day in front of a screen.

Research also shows that excessive recreational screen time can negatively affect schoolwork, activity levels and face-to-face communication skills.

To manage your child's technology use, experts recommend creating a personalized family media plan that answers the following questions:

- **What devices** do I want my child to have access to?
- **Where will devices** be allowed and where will they be off-limits?

- **How much time** will my child be allowed to use them?
- **What time** must digital devices be turned off in the evening?
- **Will the same rules apply** during weekends and school breaks?
- **What content is appropriate** for my child to access?
- **How will I monitor** the content my child accesses?
- **How will I maintain** consistency?
- **What consequences** will there be for misusing devices?
- **What example** am I setting through my own use of technology?

**Source:** J.M. Twenge and W.K. Campbell, "Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study," *Preventive Medicine Reports*, Elsevier B.V.

**Q:** My middle schooler hates to write. When she has a writing assignment, she just stares at the blank piece of paper. Is there anything I can do to help?

## Questions & Answers

**A:** Middle schoolers are often reluctant writers. Many simply freeze with fear at the thought of writing. They worry that what they write won't be any good, or that they'll be made fun of.

To help your middle schooler overcome writer's block:

- **Remind her** that professional writers have difficulty writing sometimes, too.
- **Talk through ideas** together. Encourage your child to brainstorm and make a list of as many ideas as she can.
- **Suggest she write** down her ideas just as they come. Later she can edit for flow, grammar and spelling.
- **Encourage her** to use a computer to write if possible. This makes it easier to make revisions.
- **Have her try free writing.** She should write anything that comes to mind, no matter how silly. Or, ask your child to write about something she enjoys.
- **Don't over-criticize.** If she asks you to review her writing, note what you like first. Focus on what your child is trying to say, not just the mechanics of writing.
- **Don't fix mistakes** for your child. This won't boost her self-confidence. Instead, it will send the message that you don't think your child is capable of fixing them herself.
- **Be patient.** Allow her to express her frustration. It takes time to become a good writer.

# It Matters: Reading

## Find the value in different types of reading material



Is your middle schooler a reader? Some kids don't read many novels, but that doesn't mean they are not readers.

Avoid labeling your middle schooler a nonreader—if you say it, your child is likely to believe it.

Nearly every kind of reading has value that you may not have considered. Whenever you see your child reading, recognize and encourage it.

When middle schoolers read:

- **Articles**, they learn the value of reading for pleasure and interest. As long as the material is age-appropriate, this is a constructive activity your child.
- **Sports scores**, they learn to read for information and that print and online news outlets are valuable resources. Ask your child questions that require a bit of research.
- **Nonfiction books**, they build fluency, comprehension and vocabulary skills. Consider giving your child a biography of a person you both admire.
- **Instruction manuals** or how-to books, they learn that reading can teach practical skills. Help your child look for how-to books on topics of interest.
- **Text messages**, they learn to use reading and writing to communicate. But if texts are the *only* things your child reads—it's time to set limits and introduce a bit more variety!

Source: D. Booth, *Reading Doesn't Matter Anymore ... Shattering the Myths of Literacy*, Stenhouse Publishers.

## Three ways to boost your child's reading comprehension

In middle school, academic success will depend on your child's reading comprehension. Your child will be expected to understand the meaning of a passage, based on what is implied as well as directly stated.

To build reading comprehension, encourage your child to:

1. **Make connections.** When children read something that reminds them of something they have seen or done, the reading material has more meaning and it will make them think. Help your child look for books or articles that are linked to some favorite things, places or memories.
2. **Read often.** The more your child reads, the easier it will become. And the easier reading becomes, the more energy and interest your child will have left over to focus on the meaning. Encourage your child to write a summary after reading.
3. **Think about the reading.** Ask your child questions, such as: *Who is the main character? What kind of personality does he have? How can you tell? Does he remind you of anyone you know? How do you think the book will end?*



## Your middle schooler can still benefit from read-aloud time



Middle schoolers are too old to be read to, right? Absolutely not. Most young middle schoolers are still better at *listening* than they are at *reading*.

When you read aloud to your child, you introduce new concepts, ideas and vocabulary. The key is to keep it short and to the point.

Here are some strategies to try:

- **Review the news.** Choose a news article to read aloud to your child

at breakfast. Have your child do the same for you after dinner.

- **Share what you are reading.** Read aloud a small part of something you are reading. Watch for signs of interest in your child. If they appear, read a little longer.
- **Select a book to read together.** Choose a genre that neither of you is familiar with. Consider science fiction, historical fiction or a biography and read for a few minutes each evening.