

Helping Students Learn[®]

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

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Reading actively will help your child become a better reader

Reading and thinking go hand in hand. To master complex or challenging reading material, your middle schooler must do more than stare at a page. Fortunately, this type of reading is a learned skill and can be improved with practice.

Three strategies can help your child get more out of reading assignments. Encourage your student to:



- 1. Take notes.** Many students' minds drift off when they read. To keep your child engaged with the content, suggest taking notes. Your child will have to think about which points are most important and how they connect. Just the act of notetaking often improves reading comprehension. Your child can also use sticky notes to mark key places in the text.
- 2. Think about vocabulary.** One reason middle school texts and fictional works are challenging is that they introduce students to new words and terms. On encountering an unfamiliar word, have your child stop and look up the definition and write it on an index card.
- 3. Read often for pleasure.** The more students read, the more they are able to read smoothly and accurately. This is called *fluency*, and it is an important step toward reading comprehension.

Source: "Middle School Reading: Improving Your Seventh and Eighth Grader's Reading Comprehension," Math & Reading Help, American Library Association.



Shift responsibilities onto your child

Middle schoolers don't morph into responsible young adults overnight. But with encouragement from their families to take responsibility for things kids this age can do for themselves, they get there.

Students in the middle grades are generally capable of taking responsibility for:

- **Waking up** to an alarm and getting ready on time. If your child is quick to hit the snooze button, put the clock across the room.
- **Updating a family calendar** with test dates and other school commitments.
- **Tracking assignment** due dates and scheduling time to do the work.
- **Turning assignments** in on time.
- **Reading for as much time** as they spend watching screens.
- **Keeping track of supplies** and notifying parents when they are low.

Speak up to support safety

Students have a key role to play in the safety of everyone at school. Rather than just standing by, it's essential for them to report information and concerns about violence and issues that affect classmates' well-being.

Talk with your child about the need to report concerns immediately. Topics to report include not just threats of school violence, but also bullying, drug use, self-harm, depression and suicide. Emphasize that reporting makes it possible to prevent tragedies and get people the help they need.

Source: "Improving School Safety Through Bystander Reporting: A Toolkit for Strengthening K-12 Reporting Programs," U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Avoid the friend trap

Middle schoolers are growing up, but they still need you to set limits and enforce rules about things like health, schoolwork and respectful behavior.

You are not just one of your child's friends. So don't try to be like "one of the kids" or base decisions solely on what would please your child. Instead, trust yourself as the adult and make decisions that are best for your child.



Share math success secrets

Promote the habits that help students do their best with middle school math. Encourage your child to:



- **Take notes** in math class and follow along with handouts.
- **Study class notes** every day.
- **Tackle sample problems** in the textbook. Your child can read how to solve them, then close the book and try it.
- **Ask for help** if a concept is confusing. Your child could ask a classmate to demonstrate problem-solving steps.



A family trip conflicts with school. What should we do?

Q: I know that attendance is important, but we will be traveling over the holidays and my child will miss a week of school. How can I keep my middle schooler from falling behind?

A: The only way to ensure that your child won't miss out on essential learning is to plan your travel to fall within the school's winter break. Any time students are absent from class, they miss things that can't be made up, such as class discussions.

If your travel dates can't be changed, help your child stay on track by:

- **Contacting the teachers well in advance.** Explain the situation. If the teachers are planning to assign reading or other work while you'll be gone, ask if your child can get started now.
- **Planning for learning while you are away.** Explore historical and cultural sites. Look for other educational activities not available at home.
- **Scheduling time for reading and study.** Even if there are no assignments to complete while away, your child should read for pleasure and write about your trip. In addition, solving a few math problems a day will help keep your child's skills sharp.



Are you discussing sticky situations?

Thinking and talking through challenging situations before they happen helps your middle schooler be ready to react appropriately. Are you talking with your child about tough issues? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

1. **Do you bring up** a variety of difficult scenarios—being offered alcohol, being asked to share test answers, etc.) before they happen?
2. **Do you help** your child rehearse different ways to say *no*? "My parents would ground me forever" is a standby.
3. **Do you create** frequent opportunities for casual conversations? They often pave the way for more serious talks.
4. **Do you make** it easy for your child to be honest with you by listening calmly?

5. **Do you discuss** and demonstrate your values for your child?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are preparing your child to make good choices under pressure. For each no, try that idea.

"Life is a matter of choices, and every choice you make makes you."

—John C. Maxwell

Have a goal-setting session

By now, you probably have an idea of your student's academic strengths and where improvement is necessary. Over the winter break, take time together to establish goals for the rest of the year. Goals are more effective if students set them, so help your child:

- **Identify the most important areas** to improve.
- **Set specific, realistic goals** and write them down.
- **Plan what to do** to reach the goals.
- **Check on progress** every few weeks, and make changes if necessary.
- **Review at the end** of the quarter. Renew unmet goals and set new ones.

Source: "Student Goal Setting: An Evidence-Based Practice," Midwest Comprehensive Center, American Institutes for Research.

Connect to community

Feeling a connection to the surrounding community can help nurture your middle schooler's sense of responsibility to others. Encourage your child to write a letter of thanks to a public servant, such as a fire fighter. Your child will get writing practice—and learn how nice it feels when one responsible member of society applauds another.

Board games boost skills

For a fun and educational family activity during winter break, get out the board games! Board games let students practice skills like:

- **Following** directions.
- **Using** logic, reasoning and strategy.
- **Reading**, spelling and using vocabulary.
- **Recognizing** patterns.
- **Negotiating** and communicating.



Source: D.K. O'Neill and P.E. Holmes, "The Power of Board Games for Multidomain Learning in Young Children" *American Journal of Play*, The Strong.

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