

Helping Students Learn[®]

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School
Onalaska ISD



October 2024

Building comprehension skills helps your child 'read to learn'

Reading is a key way students learn every day. That's why reading comprehension is so vital. Your child will need to understand the meaning of individual words and also the meaning of the text as a whole—both what is directly stated and what is implied.



To help your middle schooler get more out of reading:

- **Have your child ask questions** like: *What do I hope to learn from this? How is this different from what I expected?* Suggest that your student mark passages that relate to these questions with sticky notes.
- **Reinforce personal connections.** When children read something that reminds them of something they have seen or done, the reading has more meaning. Your child can also mark those passages with sticky notes saying what they bring to mind.
- **Ask questions that encourage thinking.** When your child finishes reading a passage, ask things like: *What kind of personality does the main character have? How can you tell? Do you know anyone like that? How do you think the book will end?*
- **Encourage frequent reading.** Everything your child reads adds to background knowledge, which makes future reading easier to understand. Frequent reading also builds fluency, which supports comprehension.

Sources: R. Smith and others, "The Role of Background Knowledge in Reading Comprehension: A Critical Review," *Reading Psychology*; J. Willis, "Aiding Reading Comprehension With Post-its," *Eduetopia*.



Healthy habits support school success

Life outside of school influences student performance in school. Help your child establish habits that make it easier to do well. Experts agree that middle schoolers should:

- **Make sleep a priority.** The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends between nine and 10 hours of sleep each night for peak performance in school.
- **Eat right.** Make sure your child eats a nutritious breakfast at home or at school. Talk about how to make healthy choices for lunches and snacks.
- **Drink water.** Brains need plenty of water to function well—not sugary or caffeinated drinks.
- **Be physically active.** PE class at school isn't enough! Adolescents need one hour of exercise daily.
- **Wash their hands regularly.** Handwashing is an essential part of preventing the spread of many illnesses—and school absences.

Learn more at a conference

Parent-teacher conferences may not be routinely planned in middle school, but you can always ask for one! A conference is a great way to get specific information about your child's learning and how to support it.

For the best results, arrive on time with a list of things you want to discuss. Listen with an open mind. If you don't understand something a teacher says, just ask. Then, work together on a plan to address any issues and help your child achieve.

Emphasize organization

To meet their responsibilities, students need to be organized. To foster this skill:

- **Help your child** use a planner to track assignments, test dates and school commitments.
- **Insist on weekly** school bag clean-outs. Have your child discard trash and file papers by subject.



Journal toward the future

Journaling is an effective way for middle schoolers to get a sense of their strengths, weaknesses, likes and dislikes. This gives them a head start on planning for the future. Give your child these prompts to think and write about:



- *What do I like to learn about or would I like to learn more about?*
- *What have I done that I am most proud of?*
- *What do I love doing outside of school?*
- *What is important to me right now?*

Encourage your child to update the journal regularly. It's OK if the answers change. But things that stay the same may provide clues about the path to your child's future success.



My child has writer's block regularly. How can I help?

Q: Writing is a stumbling block for my seventh grader. Whenever there's a writing assignment, my child freezes up and can't seem to start. What can I do to make this easier?

A: A blank page can be an intimidating thing for many middle schoolers. They worry that what they write won't be any good, or that they'll be made fun of.

To help your child overcome this obstacle:

- **Acknowledge the feelings.** Explain that even professional writers have difficulty with writer's block, too.
- **Encourage brainstorming.** Have your child make a list of as many ideas about the topic as possible, without stopping to consider if they are good or bad. Later, your child can look at all those written ideas and choose what to use and in what order.
- **Offer constructive support.** If your child shares the writing with you, comment first on what you like. Focus on what your child is trying to say more than on spelling or grammar mistakes.
- **Emphasize the importance of editing.** No one writes perfectly from the start. Have your child read the writing out loud. Does it really say what your child means? Let your student fix mistakes—if you do it, you send the message that your child isn't capable.
- **Model patience.** It takes time to become a skilled writer!



Are you showing that effort is worth it?

Some middle schoolers think that if learning takes effort, it means they aren't smart. But no one reaches their full potential without doing their best. Are you helping your child see the value of effort? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

___ **1. Do you help** your child enjoy doing a thorough job? "You must feel so confident knowing you double-checked your answers."

___ **2. Do you compliment** positive work habits? "You are really making the most of your time by getting started early!"

___ **3. Do you talk** about your child's progress? "You hadn't heard of factoring in August, and now you are a pro at it!"

___ **4. Do you teach** your child that learning from mistakes makes people smarter?

___ **5. Do you point out** your own effort? "I know I can make this better—I'm going to keep working on it."

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are encouraging your child's best efforts. For each no, try that idea.

"Always do your very best. Even when no one else is looking, you always are. Don't disappoint yourself."
—Colin Powell

Reduce anxiety about tests

Does the idea of taking a test make your middle schooler queasy? Test anxiety makes it harder for students to show what they know. When tests are on the schedule:

- **Ask why your child** feels nervous. Is the material too hard? Does your child feel unprepared? Is your child worried about finishing in time?
- **Help your child** make a plan. Studying every day for several days is more effective than cramming the night before. If the test will be timed, your child can practice answering questions with a timer. If your child is confused, encourage asking the teacher for more explanation.
- **Make it clear** that test scores won't change your love for your child.

How can a counselor help?

School counselors are trained to support academic and emotional well-being. You and your child can ask for help with:

- **Getting** back on track after academic problems.
- **Strengthening** study skills.
- **Coping** with friend issues, bullying, grief or family hardships.
- **Planning for the future** and achieving academic goals.

Make the most of mealtime

Daily conversations over family meals can build your child's verbal skills and connection to you. To improve table talk:

- **Discuss topics** that your child can contribute to.
- **Ask your child** specific questions. Then, try to keep the conversation going.
- **Keep the tone** pleasant. Save criticisms of your child's behavior for another time.



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P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474

1-800-756-5525 • www.parent-institute.com