

# Middle School Parents<sup>®</sup>

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Educational Service Unit #8

***still make the difference!***



## Conversations can sharpen your child's thinking skills

**W**hat kind of thinker is your middle schooler? Can he tackle a tricky assignment in a clever way? Does he weigh all sides of an issue before picking a position? Will he give a reasoned opinion about something when asked?

If the answers are *no, no* and *no*, don't worry! Like other skills, your child's thinking skills can be sharpened over time.

To develop your middle schooler's thinking skills:

- **Engage your child in conversation.** Don't gloss over the issues of the day when sitting down to dinner. Really discuss them. Encourage your child to ask questions about the things he sees online or hears at school. It may prompt him to consider those topics more deeply.

- **Ask open-ended questions.** When possible, avoid asking your child questions that can be answered with a simple *yes* or *no*. Instead, ask questions that are more likely to lead to a thoughtful response. "What has your science teacher said about global warming?" may result in a more detailed answer than, "Did you talk about anything interesting in school today?"
- **Read a news article** to your child or watch the news together. Then, ask him to share his opinion about specific topics in it.
- **Avoid quizzing your child.** Boosting his critical-thinking skills shouldn't seem like school. Try not to make him feel as if you're testing him. Rather, keep your exchanges casual and friendly.

## Reinforce the importance of attendance



Your middle schooler won't learn anything in class if she's not there, so it's vital that she come to school each day on time and ready to learn.

If your child's attendance starts to slip:

- **Prep for the school day at night.** Each evening, have your child check to see that her completed homework is in her backpack. Also, have her pack her lunch and choose her outfit for the next day. Getting her to bed at a reasonable hour will help, too. The fewer loose ends to tie up in the morning, the better.
- **Talk to her teacher.** If you find out your child is skipping a particular class (or showing up late for it), make an appointment to speak with her teacher. There could be something going on that's causing her to stay away. The sooner you figure out what the problem is, the more quickly you can begin to address it.
- **Lay down the law.** Be sure your child knows that casually missing school is not an option. Unless she has a legitimate excuse, she must be in class every day. And if she isn't? Enforce a consequence.

# Keep your middle schooler reading over the winter break



A break from school shouldn't mean a break from learning. Maintain your middle schooler's reading momentum by encouraging him to set aside at least 20 minutes every day just for reading.

To motivate your child:

- **Give books for gifts.** If your child will receive gifts this month, consider giving him a book, a gift card to a bookstore or a subscription to a magazine. Suggest this to other family members as well.
- **Give him a reason to read.** Practical reading—the kind people do to learn a skill or gain information—is both fun and informative. If your child enjoys cooking, he could read a recipe

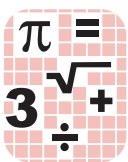
and try it out. If he likes gadgets, he could read the instruction manual and put one together. If he likes sports, he could read the newspaper or go online to find out how his favorite teams are faring.

- **Link movies to books.** Your child may enjoy watching movies during winter break. Suggest that he watch at least one movie that's based on a book. But encourage him to read the book first!

**“Reading is to the mind  
what exercise is to the  
body.”**

— Joseph Addison

# Give your child opportunities to practice math skills



If your middle schooler is going to be successful in math, it is important for you to be familiar with what she's learning and to support it. But don't panic! That doesn't mean you have to teach it to her. You just need to have a positive attitude and look for ways to help her practice math skills every day.

Here are a few ideas:

- **For arithmetic,** have your child look at the grocery receipt and add up how much you spent on snack foods. When you go out to dinner, ask her to calculate the tip.
- **For measurement,** let your child handle any measurements you need to do around the house. This includes calculating the area of a room, doubling a cookie recipe, finding out the

height of your plants—anything to help her feel more comfortable with measurement.

- **For statistics,** encourage your child to read graphs and interpret them. Find them in a daily newspaper—in print or online.
- **For estimation,** have your child help you plan a car trip. She can estimate the amount of fuel you'll need or the time she thinks you will arrive based on miles per hour and distance traveled. When one of you is doing a job, such as sweeping a room, ask your child to estimate how long it will take. Then she can compare her answer with the actual amount of time it took.

**Source:** V. Thompson and K. Mayfield-Ingram, *Family Math: The Middle School Years*, Lawrence Hall of Science, University of California at Berkeley.

# Do you encourage your child to help other people?



December, which for many is a season of giving, is a great time to help others. Are you encouraging your middle schooler to

serve his community this month and all year round? Answer *yes* or *no* to the following questions to find out:

\_\_\_1. **Have you talked** with your child about the need to help others who are less fortunate?

\_\_\_2. **Do you suggest ways** your child can get involved, such as by volunteering through a youth group at a community center?

\_\_\_3. **Do you support** your child however you can, such as by giving him a ride to do volunteer work?

\_\_\_4. **Do you encourage** your child to volunteer for causes that are meaningful to him?

\_\_\_5. **Do you volunteer** with your child when you can? You can collect canned goods or winter coats and take them to a homeless shelter.

**How well are you doing?**

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are supporting your child as he serves the community. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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# Six reasons your middle schooler should study a foreign language



Today, fewer students in the U.S. are learning to speak a language other than English. Just one in five students takes a foreign language in school.

But research shows there are real benefits to learning another language. When students study foreign languages, they enhance their:

- 1. Memory skills.** Language students must learn and remember lots of new vocabulary. They find that strengthening their memory is like strengthening a muscle. The more they use it, the stronger it gets.
- 2. Understanding of their first language.** Students start to figure out how language works. They see how the two languages are alike and how they differ. That understanding helps them improve their writing, their reading, and even their testing skills. Students who speak a second
- 3. Problem-solving skills.** Studies show that students who speak two languages also do better in math and science.
- 4. Sense of achievement.** Learning another language is a challenge. As students master it, they see they can take on other difficult subjects.
- 5. Ability to get a job.** Employers want to hire people who can speak more than one language. Employees who can talk to customers around the world are always in higher demand than those who speak one language.
- 6. Understanding of the world.** In many ways, the world is growing smaller. Speaking more than one language helps students understand the changes they see.

Source: "What Does Research Show About the Benefits of Language Learning?" American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, [nswc.com/mid\\_language](http://nswc.com/mid_language).

## Be specific and involve your child in setting limits



It isn't always easy to discipline your adolescent or get him to follow the rules. After all, it's normal for him to test limits and angle for more freedom.

Still, your child cares very much what you think of him and he wants to please you (even if he doesn't always act like it). In order to behave properly, he needs to know what you expect.

When setting limits for your child, be sure to:

- **Spell it out.** Never assume he knows what's allowed and what's not allowed. Tell your child exactly what you expect. "You must be inside by eight o'clock on school nights. No exceptions."
- **Explain why you set the rules** you do. You don't need to justify your rules, but do help him understand them. "You can't watch TV all night because it cuts into homework and family time."
- **Get his input.** If you're planning to modify a rule, let your child add his two cents. "We're considering changing your curfew. What time do you think is reasonable?" You may not follow his suggestion, but hear him out.
- **Back off.** Once your child has a solid understanding of the house rules, don't nag him about them. Instead, trust that he'll obey them. If he doesn't, be sure to enforce reasonable consequences.

**Q:** My eighth-grade daughter and I used to be really close, but now everything I do sets her off. All I hear these days is, "Leave me alone!" How can I stay involved in her life?

### Questions & Answers

**A:** Welcome to life with a budding teenager! Mother-daughter relationships are always complex, but it's especially true as your daughter reaches the teenage years. This certainly makes it difficult to stay involved with what's going on at school and in her life.

Your child might be embarrassed to see you at the school. And she may avoid talking with you about her problems.

The important thing is to remain involved. There's no magic trick to navigating this tricky time, but there are ways to stay sane as you move through it. You can:

- **Expect some turmoil.** Your daughter will be irritated by some of what you say or do—no matter how you say or do it—so just accept it.
- **Remind yourself** that it's about love. Your daughter likely reacts to you so intensely because she loves you so intensely. If she didn't care about you or your opinions, why would she bother reacting at all? This won't make her anger easier to take, but it may shed some light on it.
- **Listen more than you talk.** Don't pepper your child with questions. Sometimes the quieter parents are, the more middle schoolers will talk.
- **Seek help** if your daughter's behavior seems unusual. Talk to her pediatrician or school counselor to rule out signs of depression or other medical conditions.

# It Matters: Building Character

## Help your child learn to deal with disappointment



Students face setbacks every day. Some recover quickly. They examine what went wrong and resolve to do things

differently the next time. But others can't get past their disappointment. Weeks later, they're still stuck in the aftermath of not achieving a goal or dream.

Learning how to move on after setbacks can boost your middle schooler's academic achievement and his overall happiness—and it's a skill that can be taught. Here's how:

- **Empower your child** to solve his own problems. It's natural to want to smooth the path for your child. But when you do, you keep him from learning how to solve problems himself. Let him develop his own plan for dealing with a low grade, for example. You can help him practice what he will say to the teacher, but expect *him* to do it.
- **Encourage your child** to set realistic goals for improvement. Then, show him how to develop plans to achieve them.
- **Help your child** accept that life isn't perfect and sometimes things won't go his way. Kids who spend time on social media often think that everyone else has a perfect life. Tell your child, "Don't compare your inside with their outside."
- **Set an example.** Your child is always watching you. If you handle disappointments with grace, he'll learn healthy coping skills.

**Source:** "How Self-Regulation Can Help Young People Overcome Setbacks," Science Daily, [niscw.com/mid\\_bounceback](http://niscw.com/mid_bounceback).

## Encourage your child to develop good judgement

**W**hen you trust your middle schooler, you have faith that she will do the right thing most of the time. But knowing what the right thing is takes judgment—and that develops over time.

Here are two ways to guide your child toward good judgment:

1. **Give her increasing amounts of responsibility** for school routines. Start with a basic habit, such as bedtime. She knows what time she needs to get up for school. Tell her you will let her judge for herself a reasonable hour to get to bed. If this goes well, allow her to exercise judgment over another area of her life. If it doesn't go well, ask her what she has learned from the experience. Work out a new plan with her, and try again.
2. **Discuss situations in advance.** What would she do if a friend asked to copy her homework or a test? Your child probably knows that cheating is wrong, but kids



often get flustered when presented with tough situations for the first time. Role-playing situations with you will help her call upon her judgment skills and make a good decision when it really counts.

**Source:** N. Bernstein, *How to Keep Your Teenager Out of Trouble and What to Do If You Can't*, Workman Publishing.

## Show your middle schooler what respect looks like



You can always talk to your middle schooler about respect, but she'll likely grasp the concept more quickly if you *show*

her what it looks like. Here's how:

- **Take an interest** in your child's life. Find out who her friends are. Ask about what she's learning in school. Show your middle schooler that her daily life matters to you.
- **Acknowledge** your child's maturity. As she becomes more responsible, make sure your house rules reflect it. Give her opportunities to earn more freedom.
- **Value your child's opinions.** You're the parent and you're in charge. But that doesn't mean you can't let your child respectfully speak her mind. Show respect by listening to her.