

Middle School Parents[®]

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still make the difference!



Share test-taking strategies with your middle schooler

Standardized tests are part of your child's life, and they can have a big effect on his future education. So the next time one of these exams looms, prepare your child by teaching him a few test-taking strategies. He should:

- **Read the whole question.** If he's being timed, your child may be tempted to race through the test. Remind him to slow down and read the entire question before he jumps to finding its answer.
- **Pick out key words.** As he reads each question, your child should note key words like *including*, *except* and *compare*. They go to the heart of what's being asked.
- **Consider each available answer.** Even if your child feels certain that the first answer he sees is correct,

he should look through the rest. It's possible that another answer is stronger.

- **Answer the easiest questions first**—if the test allows your child to answer questions in any order. Once he gets past the easy questions, he can use the remaining minutes to revisit the tricky ones.
- **Make an informed guess.** If your child has no clue about a certain answer, he should guess (assuming there's no penalty for doing so). To make a solid guess, he should eliminate answers that are obviously wrong and then choose from the remaining options.

Source: G.E. Tompkins, "Preparing for Standardized Tests," Education.com, nswc.com/mid_standardized.

Are your child's after-school hours packed?



Like you, your child needs downtime to unwind. But if her schedule is packed, she won't have that downtime. To determine whether your child's after-school hours are overscheduled, ask yourself:

- **Is she frequently irritable or tired?** If she has too many things on her to-do list, she may not be getting the proper amount of rest. Experts recommend preteens get nine to 10 hours of sleep per night.
- **Does she struggle to finish her homework?** If she's taking appropriate classes but can't seem to get her work done, it may be because she has too many other things on her plate.
- **Do "mystery illnesses" keep her from participating?** If she often gets a stomachache right before soccer practice, it could be a clue that she's doing too much.

Once you've thought about your answers to these questions, talk with your child. "You seem super busy and stressed lately. How can we adjust your schedule so you get to do your favorite activities and have time to relax, too?"

Be available and nonjudgmental when talking to your adolescent



Remember that chatty elementary schooler you used to know? Well, he's turned into a guarded preteen.

Suddenly, talking with him feels like navigating a minefield. Ask him one wrong question, and he explodes. Or worse, he clams up.

To keep lines of communication open:

- **Keep your questions brief.** To stay on top of what's happening in school, avoid yes-no questions. Instead, ask open-ended ones: "What are you studying in science this week?"
- **Be available.** Your child probably opens up once in a blue moon. So when he does, it's crucial that you be there to pay attention—and to *really* listen.
- **Never talk down to him.** Your child's problems may seem minor to you. But they're *major* to him. Act otherwise, and he'll be even less likely to share next time.

- **Offer alternatives.** If your child won't confide in you, urge him to turn to another trusted adult. Whether it's a teacher, a relative or even a friend's parent, he needs to talk about school and life with someone you both trust.
- **Never give up.** These touchy years won't last forever, so hang in there. Stay optimistic, and keep being the reliable presence your child depends on. You'll get him back one day.

"Even as kids reach adolescence, they need more than ever for us to watch over them. Adolescence is not about letting go. It's about hanging on during a very bumpy ride."

—Ron Taffel

Parents must be vigilant with prescription drugs in the home



When parents think of substance abuse, most think of alcohol or illegal drugs. But prescription drugs are among those with the highest rate of abuse. And here's why: They are the easiest for children to get—and they're "free"!

To guard against prescription drug abuse:

- **Be aware** of the prescriptions in your home. Know which medications family members take, and for whom they are prescribed. Monitor their use closely.
- **Consider keeping** all prescription drugs in a locked cabinet.
- **Keep track** of your child's use of over-the-counter medicines. Monitor these, too, so you know if any are missing from your home.
- **Tell your child** to never take medicine prescribed for someone else. Ever.
- **Take special care** if someone in your family takes medicine for pain or for ADHD. Kids sometimes sell these drugs to their friends.

Are you boosting your child's concentration?



As the weather gets warmer, your child's concentration may start to diminish. Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions

below to see if you are helping your child concentrate and stay focused:

___1. **Do you encourage** your child to do a focus-building activity she enjoys? For some kids, this is reading; for others, it is sports.

___2. **Do you set limits** on screen time? Extended time in front of the TV, computer, tablet or cell phone can reduce concentration.

___3. **Do you encourage** your child to finish tasks and praise her for doing so?

___4. **Do you discourage** multitasking? It is difficult for your child to concentrate on homework if she's also watching TV and texting friends.

___5. **Do you minimize** interruptions when your child is working hard?

How well are you doing?

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are helping your child maintain good concentration. Mostly *no* answers? Check the quiz for some suggestions.

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Online activities can help students celebrate Earth Day



Earth Day is April 22nd. Help your child find eco-friendly ways to celebrate the planet by logging onto:

- **WWF Footprint Calculator**, www.footprint.wwf.org.uk. Even if your family is small, your “carbon footprint” may be big. Have your child figure out just how big with this calculator. After she answers a few questions about your food, travel and buying habits, she’ll receive an eye-opening score indicating how “green” your lifestyle really is.
- **Beyond the Barrel**, <http://azstarnet.com/app/images/flash/garbage/>. What happens to your family’s trash and recycling after your child hauls it to the curb? This site spells it out for her. Although focused on Arizona, the site’s videos and information apply pretty much everywhere.
- **Biomes of the World**, www.teachersfirst.com/lessons/biomes. An online research project, this site is terrific for seriously studious kids. Using its outline and resources, your child can discover how ecosystems depend on one another. She’ll also find suggestions for cool ways to present the data she gathers. (Keep that in mind during science-fair season!)
- **A Student’s Guide to Global Climate Change**, www3.epa.gov/climatechange/kids/index.html. What is climate change and how is it impacting the Earth? This site explains the basics and shows your child how she can be part of the solution.

Share strategies to help your child strengthen writing skills



Many middle schoolers say, “I’m just not a good writer.” Well, here is the good news: Anyone can be a good writer. All it takes is following some simple steps and a little bit of practice.

Share these tips with your middle schooler:

- **Write what you’re thinking.** Instead of agonizing over each word, your child should pretend he is simply talking to someone. Then he can write down what he’d say.
- **Read what you write.** Once your child has a draft, he should read it to someone. If he’s too shy, he can read it out loud to himself. How does it sound? What could he do to make it sound better?
- **Make changes.** Think about it: Most people make changes even when writing a grocery list. So if your child is writing something that will be graded, of course he’ll need to make changes! Editing and revising is an important part of the process. Professional writers say, “There’s no such thing as good writing—only good *rewriting*.”
- **Look for help online.** Many websites provide helpful writing tips. Your child can ask his teacher for some suggestions.
- **Read!** Remember that one of the best ways to improve writing is not by holding a pen or pencil—it’s by holding a book. So make sure your child reads often!

Q: I know I’m deciding too many things for my middle schooler. How can I help him start making his own choices without letting him make poor ones?

Questions & Answers

A: You can’t. Learning to make good decisions—and learning lessons from the bad ones—is part of growing up. So when your middle schooler makes a poor choice, don’t see it as “letting” him fail. Instead, view it as allowing him to figure out what good decision-making is.

Of course, there are certain areas where your child should not be able to decide things for himself. These include:

- **Drugs and alcohol.**
- **Chores.**
- **School attendance.**

Other areas, however, should be open for discussion—at least to a degree. Here are three:

1. **Studying.** Doing homework is non-negotiable. But be flexible about *how* your child does it. If he claims he works best sprawled on the floor with music blaring, let him try it. His grades will reveal whether he’s correct.
2. **Bedtime.** If you’ve insisted on the same bedtime for years, revisit the issue. Let your child weigh in on a decent bedtime. If it’s reasonable, allow it—as long as he gets at least nine hours of sleep each night.
3. **His room.** Do you argue with your child about keeping his room clean? Stop. Assuming it’s not so horrible that the health department intervenes, let him decide how spic-and-span things should be.

It Matters: Technology

Technology skills are valuable to school success



You may think that your middle schooler already knows all the technology skills she needs. And it's true that most middle school students are very savvy when it comes to the computer.

But there are some additional technology skills you may not have considered that can have an impact on your child's success in school. Here are three of them:

1. **Judgment.** Some of the information your child encounters online will be excellent and helpful. And a lot of it will be trash. Can your child tell the difference? Take a look at what your child finds online. Discuss the sources with her and help her determine if they are credible or if she should do some more searching.
2. **Planning.** Ask your child how she plans to use the information she finds online. Will she add it to a research paper? Will she use it to practice homework problems? Will she use it to gain a deeper understanding of a particular concept or subject?
3. **Creativity.** Most students know how to create online presentations. But is there some unexpected, exciting way your child can use and present the information she finds? How about including audio or video in her presentation? Encourage your child to use all the tools at her disposal.

Be reasonable and firm when limiting your child's screen time

Limiting your child's screen time can be tricky when so many of her school assignments require her to be online. So how do you balance school-related screen time with recreational screen time? You can:

- **Educate yourself.** How much screen time does your child's homework require? Does she really need 90 minutes daily? Or is she spending most of that time scrolling through Instagram and sending Snapchats? Check to see what your child is actually doing during homework time!
- **Establish technology-free times.** Make sure devices are turned off during meals and 30 minutes before bedtime. Keep a charging station in your kitchen so phones



and computers are not in your child's bedroom at night.

- **Set limits.** There is no magic amount of time kids should spend on screen time. The key is to help your child strike a healthy balance. Make sure she spends time on screen-free activities, such as reading, exercise and hanging out with friends.

Help your middle schooler be smart when using social media



Social media sites are like open flames. Your child must handle them very carefully or he will get burned.

Most kids aren't mature enough to handle social media until they are at least 13 years old. This is why many sites require users to be at least 13 to open accounts. (Unfortunately, many kids get around this rule by using fake birth dates.)

If your child uses social media, ask him to answer three questions before posting anything online:

1. **Would I say it to someone's face?** If not, he shouldn't post it.
2. **Would it be bullying if done in person?** If it would, he shouldn't post it.
3. **Would I be comfortable if my teacher saw it?** How about someone who might want to hire him for a job? How about someone looking over his college application? Nothing online is private. Nothing ever disappears.

Learn about the social media sites your child uses and open accounts for yourself. That way you will be able to supervise and monitor what your child is posting online.