



Successful students share secrets for mastering math

What should your middle schooler do when he's trying to solve a tough math problem? Stick with it.

That's the advice of students who took part in a well-known math competition. These kids have figured out some secrets to doing well in a subject that can sometimes trip up their peers.

So what do these students do that can help your middle schooler with math? They:

- **Think about the concept.** Instead of simply memorizing something long enough to pass a test, these students try to understand the concept behind the problem. That way, they can solve similar problems in the future.
- **Practice.** Once they figure out how to solve a type of math problem,

these students practice. And then they practice some more! Just as an athlete or a musician practices a new skill, so should a math student.

- **Focus.** Most of these strong math students say they study alone. Some do admit that their study time includes a few distractions. But they make math their focus.
- **Never give up.** What if they can't figure a problem out? These kids' most popular tactic is to just keep trying. If one thing doesn't work, they try another approach. Many also ask a teacher for extra help. If they're still stuck, they may use the internet to figure out how to get the right answer.

Source: L. Loewus, "Survey: Habits of Talented Math Students," *Education Week*, nswc.com/mid_mathsuccess.

Make the most of parent-teacher conferences



Parent-teacher conferences are often brief in middle school. But they are worth attending!

To make the most of the time you spend with your child's teachers:

- **Chat with your child** before the conference. Does she have any concerns about a teacher or a class?
- **Make a list.** Don't assume you'll remember everything you want to talk about with her teachers. Write down your questions and a few notes about the topics you'd like to cover.
- **Start on a high note.** Begin the conference by saying something positive. "My child loves the novel she's reading for your class." An upbeat start may make the meeting go more smoothly.
- **Keep an open mind.** If a teacher has concerns about your child, don't get defensive. Instead, ask for specific examples of the problem.
- **Develop a plan.** If one of your child's teachers mentions a problem, ask for ideas on solving it. The plan should include things your child can do in class and you can do at home.

Build a positive parent-child relationship to support learning



Studies show that positive adult influence is critical to children's success. Kids who have healthy adult role models:

- **Feel more secure** and optimistic than kids without role models.
- **Are less likely** to cheat on tests.
- **Are more likely** to feel happy.
- **Are more likely** to believe in their own future success.
- **Are nine times more likely** than other kids to earn straight A's.

What's the secret to being a solid role model for your middle schooler? There isn't one. Instead, there's a list of common sense things you can do to keep your child motivated and feeling loved. You should:

- **Get to know him.** Don't make snap judgments about his character. Take time to find out what makes him tick.

- **Offer specific praise.** Middle schoolers get a bum rap; they're sometimes seen as troublemakers. Don't let that perception stand. When your child does something great, say so!
- **Listen to him.** Don't dismiss your child's opinions because he's "just a kid." Spend time together and pay attention when he tells you something. This may be the biggest motivator of all.

Source: G.E. Joseph, Ph.D. and P.S. Strain, Ph.D., *Building Positive Relationships with Young Children*, The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, Vanderbilt University.

"Children are our second chance to have a great parent-child relationship."

—Laura Schlessinger

Clear expectations set your child up for academic success



When your child was a toddler, you used clear and concrete language to convey your expectations. Why? You wanted to make sure she could understand.

Now your child is older, but clear expectations are still the way to go. With a middle schooler, anything less gives her too much "wiggle room." Do not give a child this age an excuse. She just might take it. Instead:

- **Speak in terms of what *you* want** and the expectations you have. Telling your child what she *must* do may not work because you cannot control her behavior. You can only control yours. "I expect you to complete your homework before you leave the house," is more effective

than, "You'd better start doing your homework now."

- **Encourage your child** to be clear about her own expectations. If she says she expects an A on her next test, have her tell you exactly how she plans to achieve it. Suggest that she put her plan in writing.
- **Discuss teachers' expectations.** "When Mrs. Jones tells you on Friday that you have a test on Monday, what does she expect?" If you get a blank look in return, supply the answer for your child. "She expects you to start reviewing the material right away so that you will be prepared on Monday."

Source: J. Pawel, *The Parent's Toolshop: The Universal Blueprint for Building a Healthy Family*, Ambris Publishing.

Are you helping your child connect to middle school?



Students who participate in school activities beyond the academic day feel more connected to school—which makes

them more likely to perform better academically.

Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to see if you are reinforcing your child's connection to middle school:

- ___ **1. Have you reviewed** the list of school activities with your child?
- ___ **2. Do you encourage** your child to participate in at least one club or activity that matches his interests?
- ___ **3. Are you enthusiastic** if your child expresses interest in trying a new club or activity?
- ___ **4. Do you encourage** your child to attend school sporting events, dances or other social events?
- ___ **5. Do you urge** your child to take advantage of time with teachers after school or to join homework clubs?

How well are you doing?

More *yes* answers mean you are helping your child feel like a part of his middle school. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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The Parent Institute, 1-800-756-5525,
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Use four strategies to turn your middle schooler into a reader



Is your middle schooler less than enthusiastic about curling up with a good book? Help him learn to enjoy reading.

Not only will it improve his language skills, it may turn him into a lifelong book lover!

To motivate your middle schooler to read:

- 1. Lead by example.** Research shows that your reading habits can have a huge impact on your child's reading habits. So, let him see you reading for pleasure! Instead of turning on the TV when you get home from work, pick up the newspaper. On weekends, unwind with an entertaining book.
- 2. Designate daily reading time.** Set aside a short period of quiet time each day when the music, TV and computer are turned off. Suggest your child use the time to read.

Don't force him, though, because it could backfire. Instead, kick back with your own book and see if he follows your lead.

- 3. Offer a book allowance.** Give your child a small amount of money to spend on books each month. But when you take him to the bookstore, let him choose what to buy. Comics and graphic novels may not be your idea of great literature, but if they inspire him to read, they're perfect!
- 4. Subscribe to a magazine.** Whether your middle schooler is obsessed with race cars, outer space, sports or guitars, there's surely a magazine devoted to that very subject. Look for a quality publication and consider ordering a subscription for him. Each new issue offers another opportunity to read.

Source: R. Morgan, "Creative Ways to Encourage Students to Read," Creative Teaching Site, nswc.com/enjoyread.

Preparation can reduce your middle schooler's test anxiety



Does the thought of an upcoming test give your middle schooler sweaty palms and a stomach-ache? Show her how to

prepare for the big event and she may be less nervous about it.

Share these simple strategies with your child:

- **Don't cram.** One frantic night of studying won't pay off on test day. Instead, your child should begin preparing several days in advance. That way, if she doesn't understand something, she'll have time to get help before the test.
- **Use the textbook** and class notes. Are there practice tests in the book?

Encourage your child to take them as she prepares for the exam. If there aren't any, see if you can help her create a practice quiz by using her notes from class.

- **Ask for clarification.** If your child is unsure of what's going to be covered on the test, have her ask her teacher. Few things are scarier than the unknown, so the more information she has about the test, the more confident she may feel.
- **Make healthy choices.** Make sure your child is well-rested and fed on exam day. Be sure she gets enough sleep the night before and offer her a nutritious breakfast in the morning.

Q: My daughter is hanging around some not-so-nice kids in middle school, and I'm afraid she'll give into peer pressure and become not-so-nice herself. What should I do?

Questions & Answers

A: Definitely talk to your daughter, but not necessarily about any one friend. Instead, have a conversation about her and her friends in general. Ask questions such as:

- **What activities do they like** to do together?
- **What does your child enjoy** about hanging out with them?
- **What values do they share?**

It could be that these friends make her feel more mature. Or it could be that, like you, she isn't really comfortable with the way they act, but doesn't know what to do about it.

Beyond that first conversation, here's how to guide her through this tricky area:

- **Don't be judgmental.** Belittling her friends or insulting their upbringing, parents, etc. may make your child feel the need to defend them.
- **Ask gentle questions.** "It sounds like Danielle was pretty rude to the lunch lady today. How did you feel when she acted that way?" This kind of broad question may encourage your child to open up.
- **Support her.** Understand that your child isn't weak because she's affected by peer pressure. So, don't criticize her if she brings a sticky friend-related problem to you.
- **Be firm.** If you have real misgivings about some of her friends, then it's time to step in. At the very least, supervise the time your child spends with them.

It Matters: Discipline

Harsh discipline affects academic achievement



Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh have found that some kinds of parent discipline can backfire. They fol-

lowed more than a thousand students over nine years and learned that when parents practiced harsh discipline, such as hitting or using verbal or physical threats, their children turned away from the family.

As a result, these kids relied more on their peers for support. They chose to spend time with their friends instead of doing their homework. They wanted to keep their friends so badly that they would break rules to stay in the group. If their friends tried risky things like drugs or alcohol, they did as well. Girls were more likely to become sexually active. Boys were more likely to break the law.

The results were predictable: These students were not successful in middle and high school. Many dropped out of school completely.

Discipline works best when it is firm, fair and consistent. To discipline in a positive and effective way:

- **Establish a set of rules** and the consequences for breaking them. Discuss these with your child.
- **Remain calm** if your child breaks a rule. Just follow through with the established consequence.
- **Reward good behavior** with trust. Say, "I trust you to make the right decision on this. I am here if you want to talk about it."

Source: Society for Research in Child Development, "Harsh parenting predicts low educational attainment through increasing peer problems," *ScienceDaily*, nswc.com/mid_harshdiscipline.

Model the respectful behavior you'd like to see from your child

When it comes to teaching your child about respect, the idea isn't to *teach* her at all. It's to *show* her. By demonstrating what respect looks like, you'll go a long way toward helping your child become respectful.

Here are some simple ways to demonstrate respect every day:

- **Be honest.** Tell the truth. Admit mistakes—don't blame others for them. Apologize (even to your child) when you are wrong.
- **Be dependable.** If you tell your child you'll do something, do it. Earn her respect by proving that you're reliable. And when you can't do something, be honest about it. It's an easy way to show her some respect.
- **Be kind.** Don't insult or belittle your child when she messes up.
- **Be fair.** Don't pass judgment on your child or punish her for something before learning all the facts. Show respect by taking the time to get her side of the story.
- **Be polite.** Say *please*, *thank you* and *excuse me* when talking to your child. Don't barge into her room, either. Instead, knock.



Consistency is key when it comes to effective discipline



Your middle schooler pays close attention to the way the adults in his life treat him.

This includes the way they discipline him. He needs a consistent message that shows adults are serious and will follow through.

To promote consistent discipline, follow these guidelines:

- **Agree on rules** and consequences if you are parenting with another care giver. It can prevent your child from taking advantage of either of you.
- **Expect relatives** or friends who care for your child to follow *your* rules. For example, if you expect your child to be home by a certain time on weekends, then he should be home by that time when he stays with a grandparent.
- **Support the school rules** and expectations for students. Make sure you and your child understand teachers' policies regarding homework, make-up tests and turning in late work. Don't ask teachers to make exceptions for your child. Instead, expect your child to follow the rules.