

Middle School Parents[®]

March 2018
Vol. 21, No. 7

Educational Service Unit #8

still make the difference!



Research-proven strategies can boost your child's learning

Your middle schooler should have a designated place to study. But that's not the *only* place she should do her work. Research shows that students actually remember content better if they study the same material in different places.

To optimize learning and memory, students should:

1. **Study the same information** in different locations. This forces the brain to make multiple associations with the same material. When the brain relates the information to more than one background, the information has a better chance of sticking.
2. **Vary the material they study** in a single study session. For example, they might alternate studying vocabulary words and reading their

history textbook. Research shows that concentrating on multiple skills, rather than on one at a time, leaves a deeper impression on the brain.

3. **Space out study sessions** over a period of days. This helps the brain retain the material for longer than a day or two. Cramming for a test the night before may get students a passing grade. But it won't do them much good beyond that. To the brain, a quick fill leads to a quick empty.
4. **Write down a few notes** after each class. This forces them to recall the information they learned. Studies show it is more effective than simply copying information from a blackboard.

Source: G. Sundem, "How To Learn: From Robert Bjork, Director Of UCLA Learning And Forgetting Lab," Science 2.0, niswc.com/mid_retain.

Help your middle schooler develop leadership skills



Many people think of a leader as someone who gives direction. To some extent, that is true. But true

leadership has more to do with listening, learning and being an example.

Leadership skills can help children achieve in school and in life. To promote leadership traits in your middle schooler, encourage him to be:

- **Caring.** Effective leaders are always ready to offer help to anyone who needs it.
- **Open to new ideas.** Leaders know they don't know it all. They always listen to others.
- **Organized.** Leaders plan ahead. They know that leaving projects to the last minute usually produces poor results.
- **Optimistic.** Leaders trust the people they work with. They are enthusiastic. They expect things to go right, and because of their leadership, things usually do.
- **Flexible.** Leaders don't get stuck in the rut of doing everything the same way every time. They are willing to try new things.

Source: B.A. Lewis, *What Do You Stand For? For Teens: A Guide to Building Character*, Free Spirit Publishing.

Three ways you can support your middle schooler's education



When your child was younger, you may have volunteered in his class, hovered as he did his homework each night and forged close ties with his school. But now that he's growing and changing, your approach to school involvement needs to change, too.

Studies show that middle schoolers benefit from parents being involved in their schooling. But, during the middle school years, some things parents do at home are twice as effective at supporting their children's schooling as, say, chaperoning a class trip.

Research suggests three effective things parents can do:

1. **Communicate expectations.** Simply telling your child that you expect him to work hard and be successful in school can be a powerful motivator.
2. **Expand on what's being taught.** Encouraging your child to take what he's learning in school (such as

math) and apply it to his everyday life (such as sticking to a shopping budget) can help him see why education matters.

3. **Talk about the future.** Does your child want to be an architect or a fashion designer? Help him investigate the education and training necessary to prepare for careers that interest him. Remind your middle schooler that a solid education is his ticket to achieving any goal.

Source: D. Viadero, "Scholars: Parent-School Ties Should Shift in Teen Years," Education Week, nswc.com/parent_shift.

"At the end of the day, the most overwhelming key to a child's success is the positive involvement of parents."

— Jane D. Hull

Help your child see mistakes on tests as learning opportunities



Your middle schooler probably knows that a test is an assessment of what she has learned. But does she know that a test is also a way to learn? Unless your child is perfect, each test she takes should be a learning experience for her.

To help your middle schooler learn the most from tests, encourage her to:

- **Jot down thoughts** about the test as soon as possible after taking it. What did she struggle with? What does she think she knew best?
- **Keep the test** if the teacher hands it back. Some teachers require students to correct their tests. If

her teacher doesn't, your child can correct it herself at home. She can use it as a study guide for midterms or finals.

- **Figure out** what kinds of mistakes she made. Were they careless errors? That is a warning to pay closer attention when answering. Were they errors representing a lack of knowledge? Suggest that she come up with ways to study more effectively next time—such as by taking notes from the textbook or making a study guide.

Source: W.R. Luckie and W. Smethurst, *Study Power: Study Skills to Improve Your Learning & Your Grades*, Brookline Books.

Are you helping your child handle peer pressure?



Peer influence is strong in the middle school years. This influence can be positive or negative, depending on your child's peer group. Are you helping your child combat negative peer pressure? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

- ___ **1. Do you talk** with your child about doing the *right* thing rather than the *easy* thing?
- ___ **2. Do you help** your child practice ways to say *no* to things she knows are wrong?
- ___ **3. Do you empathize** with your child about the desire to fit in?
- ___ **4. Are you clear** with your child about your family rules? Also make it clear that she can talk to you if she feels pressure to break them.
- ___ **5. Do you encourage** your child to think things through? "If you did skip school with your friends, what might happen as a result?"

How well are you doing?

Mostly *yes* answers mean you're helping your child resist negative peer pressure. For *no* answers, try those ideas in the quiz.

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Practical Ideas for Parents to Help Their Children. ISSN: 1523-1283

For subscription information call or write:
The Parent Institute, 1-800-756-5525,
P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474.
Fax: 1-800-216-3667.

Or visit: www.parent-institute.com.

Published monthly September through May.
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Publisher: L. Andrew McLaughlin.
Publisher Emeritus: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.
Editor: Rebecca Hasty Miyares.

Tap into your child's 'emotional brain' for academic success



Does your child seem to be more concerned with her friends than she is with what she's learning? Is she happy one minute and devastated the next?

If so, your child is a typical middle schooler. New brain research sheds some light on the behaviors that have worried parents (or driven them crazy). Your child acts this way because, like all adolescents, her emotional brain develops faster than her rational brain.

Over the next few years, you will witness swings in your child's emotions. However, if you engage her emotional brain, you will also be able to maximize her ability to learn.

Here's how:

- **Use humor.** Middle schoolers love to laugh and make jokes.

Encourage your child to find funny cartoons, GIFs or videos about what she's learning. They can satisfy her desire to laugh and help her learn at the same time!

- **Make learning relatable.** Middle schoolers tend to think the world revolves around them. So, link what your child is learning to her life. If she is studying the Revolutionary War, ask her to think about a time she felt like revolting against authority.
- **Promote imagination.** Middle schoolers have great imaginations. Help your child put her imagination to work when she is studying. Ask her questions like, "What would it have felt like to be there with George Washington at Valley Forge?"

Source: T. Armstrong, "Maximize the Power of the Middle School Brain," MiddleWeb, niswc.com/mid_brain.

Start talking to your child about the transition to high school



A big transition is ahead for many middle schoolers and their parents.

High school is a mere six months away—and you and your child may be nervous.

Most middle schoolers:

- **Feel excitement** about the opportunities high school offers. These include new friendships and more freedom. High school also lets students pursue new interests through extracurricular activities.
- **Feel nervous.** High school standards for academics, behavior and independence are far beyond what most middle schoolers are used to. There may be more students and a larger school building, too.

To ease anxiety:

- **Tap available resources.** Encourage your child to talk to his school counselor and ask any questions he may have. Also be sure to attend orientation sessions offered by the high school.
- **Talk to your child.** Share some of your own high school memories. Discuss the classes your child wants to take and how he will manage his schedule. Have him talk with current high school students about their experiences.
- **Encourage your child.** Starting high school is a huge milestone. Your child is growing up. Let him know you are proud of him and are looking forward to this new stage.

Q: My seventh grader insists that *everybody* is going somewhere for spring break. I have taken the week off from work, but we're staying home. How can we make the most of our week off without breaking the bank?

Questions & Answers

A: Chances are, "everybody" won't really be heading to the Bahamas. But they might as well be—at least in your child's mind. And while you don't need to compete with his friends when it comes to spring break, it's wise to plan a few entertaining things to do together during your week off.

Here are some inexpensive yet fun ideas to get you started:

- **Be tourists at home.** What draws visitors to your region? Is it a first-rate museum? A beautiful state park? Whatever it is, you probably don't spend enough time enjoying it. During spring break, try seeing your hometown with fresh eyes. Grab your child and explore your area's attractions together.
- **Host a movie night.** See if your child can find a friend who's also home during spring break. Invite him over for pizza, popcorn and movies.
- **Shadow a professional.** Does your child love animals? See if you can arrange a day where he can volunteer or observe at a nearby veterinary clinic.
- **Make one day a "vacation day."** For 24 hours, give your child a break from chores and rules (within reason). Let him sleep in, stay up late or eat extra dessert.
- **Visit a nearby college.** If you don't want to schedule a formal tour, just walk around campus, visit the library and check out the student union.

It Matters: Reading

Share reading strategies with middle schoolers



Middle school students need to know how to read for meaning. They also need to be able to identify the main idea

and draw inferences (read between the lines). Studies show that about one in four middle schoolers can't do these things.

To boost your child's reading skills, encourage her to:

- **Ask questions.** Good readers are curious. Before reading an assignment, your child should look it over and review the pictures and words in bold type. What questions do they raise in her mind? As she's reading, have her jot down other questions. When she's finished reading, she should be able to answer all of her questions.
- **Learn new words.** As your child reads, she should write down any new words she learns along with their meanings.
- **Find the main idea.** After your child reads an assignment for class, she should ask herself, "What was the main idea?" Paying attention to the main idea can help your child focus on what's important in her reading.
- **Work on fluency.** Middle schoolers should be able to read 100-160 words per minute, depending on the difficulty of the text. Look for short articles that will interest your child and time her reading. Then, challenge her to read at a faster pace and still grasp the main idea.

Source: A.G. Boardman, "Effective Instruction for Adolescent Struggling Readers," Center on Instruction, nswc.com/mid_readtips.

A strong vocabulary is key for middle school reading success

In middle school, the reading material is more complex and contains advanced vocabulary. Having a broad vocabulary will give your child an advantage. A limited one may hold him back.

Your child can strengthen his vocabulary by:

- **Reading.** Your child should read every day. And he should read a variety of materials—novels, short stories, newspapers, magazines and websites. The more reading material your child takes in, the more words he will encounter. He should look up words he doesn't know. Encourage him to keep a list of these words and their definitions in a small notebook.
- **Talking.** Make an effort to introduce new words when you have a conversation with your child. This is a great exercise for everyone in the family. It may



seem awkward at first. But try to make it a habit if your child struggles with reading.

- **Practicing.** Reading and hearing all these new words may not mean much if your child doesn't use them. Challenge him to use one or two new words a day.

Source: C. Snow, "Building vocabulary to improve reading in middle school," Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Prior knowledge helps kids understand and relate to text



Research shows that your child's ability to understand and relate to what she reads is linked to what she knows

before she opens the book. This is called *prior knowledge*.

Having some knowledge before reading means your child will not have to try to figure out the text only from the information in front of her. Prior knowledge of a topic may also keep her more engaged in what she's reading. To help:

- **Encourage your child** to read news articles. They will expose her to topics and themes that she will likely encounter in her schoolwork.
- **Expand your child's world.** Attend free exhibits and shows. Every bit of culture your child soaks up may help her make a connection to something she'll read in the future.
- **Share your experiences.** Talk with your child about places you have been or jobs you have had.

Source: K. Allan and M. Miller, *Literacy and Learning: Strategies for Middle and Secondary School Teachers*, Houghton Mifflin.