

Middle School Parents[®]

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still make the difference!



Four New Year's resolutions for middle school students

Your middle schooler started the school year with the best of intentions. But lately, things seem to be off track. She's missing some assignments. She waits until the last minute to get things done.

Middle schoolers often need a "reboot" in the middle of the school year. Making a few New Year's resolutions is one way to get your child back on the path to success.

Suggest that your child resolve to:

1. **Get organized.** Let's face it—middle schoolers are not always organized. Have your child use helpful tools to keep track of her schedule and school assignments. She can use a calendar, sticky notes, to-do lists and an assignment notebook. Help her get into the habit of cleaning out her backpack and school notebooks regularly.
2. **Set a schedule.** By January, many students have abandoned their homework routines. Help your child reestablish a homework time, and then make sure she studies at that time every day. It won't take long for it to become a habit.
3. **Give "mono-tasking" a try.** Kids claim they are multitasking when they listen to music, chat with friends and try to do their homework all at the same time. But the truth is that their brains can't really handle all that activity. Encourage your child to focus on one thing at a time.
4. **Set a new goal.** Would she like to raise her English grade? Encourage her to figure out what it will take to reach that goal. When students are clear about the steps they must take to reach a goal, it's easier to make the choices that will help them achieve it!

Learn about the different types of peer pressure



Middle schoolers can be easily influenced by their peers—and that's not always a bad thing.

Get to know the types of peer pressure and learn how to respond to each.

Peer pressure can be:

- **Positive.** Your child's friends volunteer for a good cause. They want good grades on the next history project. They enjoy hanging out at each other's homes with movies and snacks. Your response: Support your child's activities. Praise the effort he and his friends make. Welcome his friends to your home.
- **Neutral.** Your child wears his hair messy because his friends do. Your response: Do nothing. This typical middle school behavior is innocent and harmless.
- **Negative.** Your child got caught shoplifting with friends. You smell cigarette smoke on his clothes. Your response: Steer your child to positive activities and monitor him closely. Don't allow sleepovers with friends who spell trouble. Encourage him to spend time with more responsible friends and allow more freedom when he earns back your trust.

Effective ways to handle your middle schooler's emotions



Just when you thought your child had outgrown tantrums, along comes adolescence. Preteens are notorious for their high emotions. Here are tips for handling your child's angry outbursts:

- **Stay in control.** Overreacting to your child's anger only adds fuel to the fire. Give your child some space and time to settle down. Resume your discussion when you're both calm.
- **Avoid harsh punishment.** It's tempting to yell, "You're grounded for a month!" when you're upset. But discipline should be designed to teach, not punish.

- **Don't give in.** If you've made a good decision, stick to it. Show your child that pleading and tantrums will not change your mind.
- **Offer choices.** Giving your middle schooler a sense of power can reduce frustration and outbursts. Say things like, "You can finish your report either before soccer practice or after. It's your decision."

"The child supplies the power but the parents have to do the steering."

—Dr. Benjamin Spock

Teach your middle schooler to focus on six key areas of writing



It can be hard to help middle schoolers with their writing. They're often sensitive to criticism and resistant to suggestions for improvement.

Try offering guidance *before* your child begins writing. Encourage him to focus on these six key areas:

1. **Ideas and content.** Your child's writing should be interesting to read and should stick to the topic at hand. The reader should be able to understand and follow what he is trying to say.
2. **Organization.** His writing should have a clear beginning, middle and ending. It should clearly present a main idea. Other sentences should give details that support the main idea.
3. **Voice.** Your child's writing should represent him. His personality, feelings and tone should shine through.
4. **Sentence structure.** Your child's writing should grab the reader's attention. The sentences should have a natural flow, similar to a conversation. Each sentence should be distinct. Your child should avoid repeating word patterns. For example, one or two sentences may begin with "I feel" or "This is" but the others should all begin quite differently.
5. **Choice of words.** His writing should "paint a picture." When he describes something, the reader should be able to visualize it. Quality writing does not use words that simply take up space and have little meaning for the reader.
6. **Mechanics.** Your child should proofread his work and use correct spelling, grammar and punctuation.

Are you helping your child focus on the future?



As a middle school student, your child is not quite ready to begin filling out college or job applications. But she is ready to begin thinking about her future.

To find out if you are helping your child plan for the future, answer *yes* or *no* to the following questions:

- ___ 1. **Do you encourage** your child to take challenging courses?
- ___ 2. **Do you talk** with your child about what types of careers she might like to pursue when she is an adult?
- ___ 3. **Do you discuss** different post high school options (college, technical school) with your child?
- ___ 4. **Do you tell** your child that you want her to gain the maximum education possible?
- ___ 5. **Do you work** with your child to establish effective study habits now, knowing she will need them even more in the future?

How well are you doing?

Mostly *yes* answers mean you and your child are preparing a foundation for her future. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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Community service promotes learning and builds valuable skills



Studies show that students who participate in community service have better grades and more interest in school than those who don't. Volunteers tend to have strong positive feelings about themselves and their place in society.

Students who volunteer:

- **Are less likely to take dangerous risks**, such as doing drugs.
- **Have higher self-esteem**, are more responsible and feel more connected to their community.
- **Have stronger social skills**.
- **Are more likely to stay in school**, have regular attendance and perform well.
- **Learn valuable skills**, such as how to interact with different kinds of people, how to solve problems and how to follow through on commitments.
- **Meet interesting people**, such as the heads of agencies or businesses. These contacts can be references for students in the future.

Encourage your child to get involved and reap the benefits of volunteering. She could:

- **Read to preschoolers** or senior citizens.
- **Be an assistant counselor** for a children's program for low-income families.
- **Be an assistant coach** for a youth sports team.
- **Organize a drive** to clean up a local park or playground.
- **Shovel a driveway** or help with housework for a new mom or an elderly neighbor.
- **Make cards** for nursing home residents.

Source: "Civic Engagement: Benefits for Youth," youth.gov, niswc.com/mid_community.

Responsibility includes sense of duty, self-reliance and persistence



Of course you want your child to become a responsible person. But does she know what that means?

To help her understand what being responsible looks like, talk about the traits that most responsible people share. Suggest ways she can model those same traits.

For instance, responsible people usually demonstrate:

- **A sense of duty.** They do what they're supposed to do—even if they don't feel like it. For your child, that might mean getting ready for school on time, finishing her homework every night and doing her chores.
- **Self-reliance.** They value self-sufficiency, so they do as much as

they can for themselves. True, your middle schooler is too young to be completely self-reliant. But she can take a big step toward becoming more responsible. Empower her to handle many of her own tasks, such as doing her own laundry.

- **Persistence.** They don't give up, and they don't abandon goals that seem out of reach. Your child can demonstrate persistence by hanging in there when the going gets tough. If she doesn't earn a spot on the basketball team this year, for example, she can sharpen her skills in the off-season and try again next time.

Source: M.S. Josephson and others, *Parenting to Build Character in Your Teen*, Boys Town Press.

Q: My middle schooler gets stressed about everything—from homework to snowstorms! How can I help him better manage his anxiety and learn how to go with the flow?

Questions & Answers

A: Middle school is full of big changes, so it's normal for your child to get anxious from time to time. However, if the stress itself—rather than whatever set it off—is becoming too much, it's time to step in and take some action.

To help your child better manage his everyday stress:

- **Teach him to recognize** the warning signs. Does he start grinding his teeth or biting his nails when he gets anxious? That's when he should take action. Stress is much more manageable when it's caught early.
- **Help him create** an action plan. If your child is stressed out over an upcoming project, show him how to break it into small parts. A big task is daunting, but a series of smaller ones may not be.
- **Encourage healthy habits.** A healthy diet and adequate sleep can help ease anxiety.
- **Suggest ways** for him to blow off steam. Exercise, reading or shooting hoops with a friend may be all your child needs to calm down.
- **Remind him** that you have his back. Your stressed-out child may feel like the weight of the world is on his shoulders. So let him know you're right there with him and will help him overcome his stress so he can be successful.
- **Talk to the school counselor** or your child's pediatrician if his anxiety becomes difficult to manage.

It Matters: Motivation

Self-affirmation activity boosts performance



It's no secret that motivation can affect a student's performance in class. Kids who are nervous or lack motivation just don't perform up to their ability.

A series of studies show that there is a simple task that can help boost performance: Students were asked to write for five to 10 minutes about a value that mattered to them. They explained why they chose the value (such as *friendship* or *honesty*). They also wrote about how that value affected how they acted and felt. Students repeated this activity several times during the school term.

The results? Students who completed this "self-affirmation" writing activity did better in class. They got higher grades. The impact lasted beyond one year. The next year, these students signed up for more challenging classes and got better grades.

The impact was especially strong for middle school students, who sometimes make choices that can affect their future. Some choose to give their best effort and succeed. Others quit trying.

In the studies, students did these writing exercises in school. Why not encourage your child to try something similar at home? Together, brainstorm a list of important values. Have your child spend some time each day writing about them in a journal.

Source: M. Martinovich, "Self-affirmation plays role in minority students' college success," *Phys.org*, nismwc.com/mid_self-affirm; "Benefits of Self-Affirmation," Carnegie Mellon University, nismwc.com/mid_self-affirm2.

Middle school students share what they need from parents

Send your child to school ready and eager to learn each day by making sure he feels loved and supported at home. According to experts, kids who enjoy strong relationships with adults:

- **Feel safer** and have a sunnier outlook than kids who don't.
- **Are less likely** than other kids to cheat on a test.
- **Feel healthier** and happier than other kids.
- **Believe they'll succeed** in the future.
- **Are more likely** than other kids to excel academically.

What's the best way to show your child your love? When asked in a survey, students said they'd like their parents to:

- **Take an interest** in schoolwork.
- **Really listen** when they have something to say.
- **Stop comparing** them to others.
- **Meet their teachers** and learn about their classes.



- **Be good role models.**
- **Spend more time** with them just having fun as a family.
- **Avoid lecturing** about mistakes.
- **Treat them with respect.**
- **Encourage them to do well** in school and elsewhere.
- **Set reasonable rules** and limits.
- **Notice when they do things right.**
- **Offer guidance.**

Source: A. Jackson and others, *Making the Most of Middle School: A Field Guide for Parents and Others*, Teachers College Press.

Take advantage of technology to motivate your middle schooler



Students are more motivated to learn when they are actively engaged in that learning. And one of the best ways to engage them is by using technology.

Show your child some ways she can incorporate technology into her learning. When she is:

- **Reading a textbook assignment**, she can use a computer, tablet or smartphone to type her notes.

- **Working on homework**, she can search on YouTube (www.youtube.com) for teaching videos on the subject.
- **Studying for a test**, she can use an app or website like quizlet.com to create custom flash cards and practice quizzes.
- **Working on a project**, she can create presentations using digital tools, such as prezi.com and edu.glogster.com.