

Helping Students Learn[®]

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

Sierra Charter School



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Give your child plenty of reasons to read books for pleasure

Has reading for pleasure slipped down your middle schooler's list of priorities? She may think she already does enough reading for her classes, but she's wrong.

A recent study surveyed more than 40,000 students aged 11-14. The researchers found that the kids who read books for pleasure daily scored significantly higher on literacy tests—the equivalent of months of academic progress.



Test results may not impress your child. So remind her of other benefits of pleasure reading that may mean more to her. Through books she can:

- **Meet characters like herself** and see how they handle similar issues.
- **Develop her expertise.** Reading is the best way for your child to learn as much as possible about her areas of interest.
- **Visit exciting places.** In a time when travel options may be limited, your child can journey anywhere she likes through a book.
- **Enjoy a laugh.** Appreciating the humor in books develops your child's thinking skills—and her own sense of humor.
- **Become a detective.** A winter day is a perfect time for her to settle in with a cup of hot chocolate and an intriguing mystery.

Source: J. Anderer, "Children Who Regularly Read for Pleasure Perform Better In School, Study Finds," Study Finds, niswc.com/midddlereading.



Adapt study time to changing bodies

Adolescence marks the biggest period of physical change since infancy. So it's not surprising that middle schoolers seem to fidget and snack all the time.

These urges are normal, but they can be distracting when your child is studying or working on assignments. Here are some ways to help if your child frequently:

- **Gets up out of his chair.** Sitting too long on a growing, hardening tailbone can cause pain. Suggest that your child try doing some of his homework standing up. Or he could study flash cards while walking around the house.

- **Squirms.** Your child's growing bones are constantly tugging on his muscles. This causes "growing pains." Encourage him to plan stretch breaks to ease them.
- **Raids the fridge.** All of this physical growth takes fuel. Stock up on healthy snacks and let your child munch while he studies.

Source: P. Lorain, "Squirming Comes Naturally to Middle School Students," National Education Association.

Parents play a starring role

You are your child's parent, not just another friend. She may be growing up, but she still needs you to set limits and enforce rules about things like safety, schoolwork and respectful behavior. So don't base decisions solely on what would please your child. Instead, trust yourself as the adult and make decisions accordingly.



Put friendship on paper

Students have embraced high-tech ways to maintain their social lives. But one surefire method for connecting with friends doesn't require technology: letter writing. Writing letters also lets your child practice grammar and storytelling skills. To encourage it:

- **Fill a basket** with paper, pens, stamps and envelopes. Put it in a visible spot.
- **Issue a challenge.** Can your child write one letter a week?
- **Collect postcards** from places your family goes—even the next town over. Your child can share stories of his experiences there with friends.



Encourage future thinking

The choices your child makes in middle and high school will affect her higher education and career options. So now is the right time to start talking with your child about her:

- **Interests.** What does she like learning about? Help her find out about college programs in that area.
- **Possibilities.** Odds are your child hasn't heard of lots of careers. Help her discover options by researching online.
- **Path.** Discuss what she can do—take rigorous courses, study hard, etc.—to reach her goals for her future.



How can I help my child cope with workload stress?

Q: My middle schooler is intimidated by his workload this year. He seems to be under a lot more pressure now than in elementary school. How can I help him feel less overwhelmed?

A: Managing six or seven classes can leave even the most enthusiastic students feeling intimidated. And the challenges of this extraordinary year may be adding to your child's stress. If his overall workload is scaring him, help him break it down and organize it into small, manageable pieces. Here's how:



- **Have your child write** down all his assignment due dates on a calendar. He should be sure to include recurring items such as weekly journal entries, bi-weekly quizzes, etc. Then he can plan each day's work.
- **Help him divide big projects** into steps. If he's worried about writing a research paper, remind him that it's just a combination of tasks he knows how to do: read, take notes, write an outline, etc. Set due dates for each step, then encourage him to concentrate on one step at a time.
- **Regroup each week.** Every Friday, review your child's assignments with him. What has he completed this week? What's on the horizon? Check on how well he's using his calendar. Is it up-to-date?
- **Reassure your child** that all new middle schoolers are making the same adjustments that he is. Tell him you think he's up to the challenge!

Parent Quiz

Are you discussing difficult issues?

Middle schoolers often have to handle some pretty tough situations—from problems with peers to events in the world around them. Are you helping your child tackle them head on? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

- ___ **1. Do you communicate** your values to your child?
- ___ **2. Do you discuss** sticky situations she may encounter before they happen?
- ___ **3. Do you role-play** with your child so she can practice ways to respond?
- ___ **4. Do you expect** your child to be honest with you—and then stay calm when she is?
- ___ **5. Do you engage** your child in casual conversations? They often pave the way for more serious talks.

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are preparing your child to respond well under pressure. For each no, try that idea.

"One of life's best coping mechanisms is to know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem."

—Robert Fulghum

Make choices step by step

To promote responsible decision-making, teach your child to go through four steps whenever she's faced with a dilemma:

- 1. Define the situation.** Have your child ask herself, "What's the main thing I'm concerned about?"
- 2. List all her options.** Remind her that there are often more than just one or two.
- 3. Consider likely outcomes.** She can rule out options that have serious negative consequences. If one option has major advantages, it may be the winner.
- 4. Choose a solution** and remember its results in case the issue recurs.

Discuss the look of bullying

Middle schoolers can sometimes have a hard time recognizing bullying if a popular child is the one doing it. Tell your child to focus on what is happening. Are the actions hurtful? Are the words mean or meant to cause sadness, fear or embarrassment? If so, it's bullying—even if the bully is someone everybody likes and the victim doesn't have many friends. Your child should alert an adult.

Attitude makes a difference

Students need inner motivation to put in the effort to succeed or to persist when things get tough. Having a positive attitude is the key. To help your child develop one, encourage him to:



- **Focus on things** he can change. He can't change the content of his classes. But he *can* change how much he prepares.
- **Think of others.** Doing something good for another person is a mood lifter.
- **Keep a positivity journal.** He can write about things that bring him happiness and make him feel motivated.

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