

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

Dana Middle School
San Pedro, CA

November 2009

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

How can parents encourage responsible decision making?

Q: I know that learning to make decisions for herself will make my middle schooler more responsible, but where should I start?

A: During middle school, kids should make some decisions themselves. Once you see how your child does, you'll know more about when to grant freedom. Here are some choices to offer:

- **How** to use her spare time.
- **Which** part of the day to set aside for homework.
- **How** to spend money (after saving some).
- **Whether** to take on an occasional job, such as dog walking.
- **When** to finish chores.



Discuss decisions beforehand. For example, "You have to study for one hour. You can pick a regular study time, and we'll see how it goes." Note the results. Does she stick to the schedule? Does she relax during free time without getting sidetracked for hours? Match freedom to her abilities.

Allow small mistakes. If everything goes well, great! If not, let her see the results. Example: She spends her allowance too soon, and she can't buy something she wants.

Be understanding as she learns. Say, "It's hard when something like this happens. What could you do to keep it from happening again?" With enough practice, she'll succeed.

REINFORCING LEARNING

Promote learning during holiday meals

Who says learning only happens at school? You can reinforce your middle schooler's learning at home! Expecting guests for a holiday dinner?

Encourage your preteen to:

- **Get cooking.** You can't help using math when you're in the kitchen, so have your middle schooler help with the feast! Each time he measures ingredients or evenly slices a pie, he'll be putting his math skills to the test.
- **Get creative.** Ask your middle schooler to design a centerpiece to use during dinner. Have him include what he knows about the holiday—the foods, the people, the events—in his product. Give him credit for his masterpiece!

TALKING & LISTENING

Stop lecturing and listen

Parents often turn to lecturing when kids do something wrong—to teach them a lesson. But moody middle schoolers often take offense and feel attacked.

To avoid lecturing:

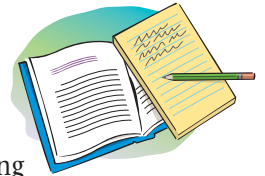
- **Monitor** your body language.
- **Share** your feelings. "I'm disappointed."
- **Ask** your child what he thinks—and listen to the response.

ENCOURAGING READING

Improve comprehension

You can help your child identify the main idea in a story by asking questions such as:

- **What** was the most important event? Why?
- **Who** were the main characters?
- **How** did the story make you feel?
- **Was** the author trying to change your mind about an issue?



Source: Drew and Cynthia Johnson, *Homework Heroes*, ISBN: 0-7432-2259-8 (Kaplan, published by Simon & Schuster, www.simonsays.com).

MOTIVATING YOUR CHILD

Boost class participation

Most teachers include class participation in grades. But some students are afraid of saying the wrong thing. Or they don't like having peers focus on them.

If your child is afraid of making a statement, suggest that she ask a question. Then she won't be worried about making an incorrect point.

It also helps to be familiar with material. Practice with your child. Ask questions and let her answer. If she's unsure what to say, she may need to review.



SETTING EXPECTATIONS

What do you expect?

Don't just tell your middle schooler to "be good." Be specific. "I expect you not to pick on your brother while I'm upstairs." "I expect you to use your manners while you're at Joey's house for dinner." It's important to set expectations for your middle schooler, but it's just as important that your expectations be reasonable—and clear.

When setting expectations for your middle schooler, include ways to:

- **Limit phone calls and text messages.** "You can talk on the phone up to an hour each night. But there are no more calls or texts—incoming or outgoing—after 9 p.m."
- **Rein in screen time.** Establish similar limits on screen time as for phone calls.
- **Keep you posted about his plans.** "If there's someplace you want to go, let me know ahead of time. Try not to tell me at the last minute."
- **Participate in family events.** Give your child plenty of time with his friends, but don't totally excuse him from family activities. "Remember, we have lunch with Grandpa every Sunday, and you need to be there."
- **Clean up after himself.** "Dirty laundry goes in the hamper in the linen closet. Any dirty clothes left on your bedroom floor won't get washed. Period."



Source: Ray Burke, Ph.D. and others, *Common Sense Parenting: Using Your Head as Well as Your Heart to Raise School-Aged Children*, ISBN: 1-889322-70-9 (Boys Town Press, www.boystownpress.org).

PARENT QUIZ

Are you staying involved in school?

Parent involvement tends to drop off after elementary school, which hurts students, parents and schools. Answer the following questions *yes* or *no* to see if you are staying involved in your child's education:

- ___ **1. Do you continue** to attend events for parents, such as back-to-school night?
- ___ **2. Do you attend** parent-teacher conferences?
- ___ **3. Do you make sure** to meet all of your child's teachers, and give them at least one way to reach you (such as phone or email)?
- ___ **4. Are you aware** of the type of homework your child does? Do you suggest resources where she might find help?
- ___ **5. Do you ask** your middle schooler questions about what she is learning in school?

How did you do? *Each yes answer means you are continuing to be involved in your child's education. For each no answer, try that idea.*

*"Parents can have a powerfully positive effect on their child's learning."
 —Richard W. Riley*

Be aware of food issues

Studies show that eating disorders are no longer just a teen issue—they're a preteen issue, too. Signs of an eating disorder include:

- **Rapid** changes in weight.
 - **Sudden**, odd eating habits.
 - **Doing** extreme amounts of exercise.
- Be on the lookout for emotional signs like:
- **Depression** or irritability.
 - **Increased** anxiety.
 - **Perfectionism.**

Remember: This does not mean your child has an eating disorder. But it is important to stay vigilant and pay attention to her.

Source: Abigail Natenshon, M.A., LCSW, "Eating disorders a lethal and epidemic problem worldwide," EmpoweredParents.com, www.empoweredparents.com/pages/jwalsh.html.

BUILDING SOCIAL SKILLS

Teach kids to keep cool

Students get in trouble every day because they overreact to rudeness. They may even wind up in worse trouble than the student who started it. Have your child plan to:

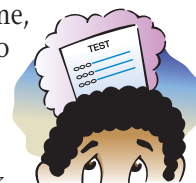
- **Turn** away from conflict in class.
- **Take** deep breaths to cool down.
- **Ask** to be briefly excused and have a drink of water.
- **Think** of detention and work to avoid it!

STUDY SKILLS

Strengthen study skills

Is your middle schooler anxious about a big test coming up? Suggest that he:

- **Read ahead.** By skimming the next chapter ahead of time, he'll be better prepared to ask questions.
- **Review his notes.** Even if he doesn't have homework, he should still look over the day's notes at night.
- **Attend school every day.** He can't learn if he isn't in class.



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Published in English and Spanish, September through May.

Publisher: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.

Editor: Jennifer McGovern.

Staff Editor: Rebecca Miyares. Writer: Erika Beasley.

Production Manager: Pat Carter.

Head of Translations: Michelle Beal-García.

Layout & Illustrations: Maher & Mignella, Cherry Hill, NJ.

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P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474

1-800-756-5525 • www.parent-institute.com • ISSN 1527-1021