

# Middle School Parents<sup>®</sup>

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## Motivate your underachieving middle schooler with support

**Y**our middle schooler is smart, so why does he keep bringing home so-so grades? The issue may be motivation—or, rather, a lack thereof.

If that's the case, he's not alone. According to a U.S. Department of Education study, students' lack of motivation is a main cause of low achievement in school.

Of course, students become underachievers for different reasons. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problem. There are, however, many strategies you can use.

To motivate your child:

- **Talk to him.** Find out what makes your child tick and what he enjoys most/least about school. Is he bored because the work is too easy? Is he overwhelmed because

the work is too hard? Figure out your child's feelings and you'll be that much closer to solving the issue.

- **Work with his school.** Talk with your preteen's teachers regularly. Get their thoughts on how he's doing in class. Ask for suggestions about encouraging him to try harder.
- **Believe in him.** Your preteen may feel like the whole world is against him. So show him that you're always on his side. Knowing you believe in him may go a long way toward motivating him to do better in school.

Source: "Motivating Your Underachiever," Parenthood.com, [www.parenthood.com/article-topics/article-topics.php?Article\\_ID=5710](http://www.parenthood.com/article-topics/article-topics.php?Article_ID=5710).

## Help your middle schooler develop leadership skills



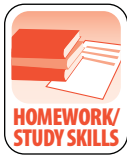
Many people think of a leader as one who gives direction. To some extent, that is true. But real leadership—a desirable character trait—has more to do with listening, learning and being an example.

Your child can develop leadership if she is:

- **Caring.** Effective leaders care. They look for someone who could use help. And then they step up.
- **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 prepare. They 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: Barbara A. Lewis, *What Do You Stand For? For Teens: A Guide to Building Character*, ISBN: 1-57542-029-5 (Free Spirit Publishing, [www.freespirit.com](http://www.freespirit.com)).

## Soothe your child's homework headaches with routines, quiet



Research shows that studying at home can help your middle schooler perform better at school. Does your child have good homework habits?

Now is a great time to reevaluate your child's homework routine.

To reinforce homework habits:

- **Choose a central location.** Whether it's a desk in his room or a spot at the kitchen table, pick a work zone for your child. Keep it quiet, well lit and stocked with supplies. If he works in the family room, enforce a "no TV or radio during study time" rule for others in your home.
- **Stick around.** Don't hover as your preteen works. But do be available to offer praise or encouragement. It'll show that his schoolwork matters to you.
- **Set a limit.** Allow a certain amount of time for studying each night—about 45–75 minutes for middle

schoolers. No homework? He can use the time to study or read.

- **Designate a start time.** If possible, have your child begin working at the same time every evening. Just be flexible when necessary.
- **Be a good role model.** Use your preteen's study time to complete your own quiet activities. Read a magazine, answer email or balance the checkbook while he gets his work done.

Source: Ray Burke, Ph.D., Ron Herron and Bridget A. Barnes, *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).

**"When your children reach adolescence, they fire you as parent. You've got to scramble to get rehired as a consultant."**

—Michael Riera

## Impress upon your child the reasons for being respectful



You have probably talked many times with your child about how to treat others. But have you had a good discussion about

why? Middle school students are ready for a higher level of thinking. So it is important that they know the reasons behind the action. Here are the reasons for being respectful:

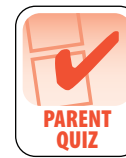
- **Respectful behavior is moral and ethical.** It's the difference between right and wrong.
- **Respectful behavior is fair.** Rude and disruptive behavior is not fair. The person it is directed at does

not deserve it. No one does. It is also not fair to the people around who are trying to teach and learn.

- **Respectful behavior is rewarded.** Your child will benefit from a reputation as a respectful, kind and polite person. Respectful people are often chosen as leaders. They receive greater responsibilities and freedoms. Why? Because it is already clear that they know how to treat others. They are the kind of people others look up to.

Source: Linda Sonna, *The Everything Parenting a Teenager Book*, ISBN: 1-59337-035-0 (Adams Media, an F+W Publication Company, www.adamsmedia.com).

## Are you helping your child handle peer pressure?



Take this quiz to see if you are providing your child with strategies to resist peer temptation to try things that may be

harmful or wrong for her. Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

\_\_\_ 1. **Have you made your family values clear to your child?** "Smoking is a health risk we do not condone in our family."

\_\_\_ 2. **Do you practice role-playing different ways to say no with your child?**

\_\_\_ 3. **Do you urge your child to say no with conviction?** This is an occasion when it is okay to be rude or walk away.

\_\_\_ 4. **Do you tell your child to blame you?** "It sounds like fun. But I can't do it—my mom is so strict!"

\_\_\_ 5. **Do you focus on the lesson?** Your child may slip, but you can discuss what she learned and plan for how to avoid the problem in future.

**How well are you doing?**

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are actively helping your child deal with negative peer pressure. For *no* answers, try those ideas in the quiz.

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The Parent Institute®, 1-800-756-5525,  
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Editor: Rebecca Miyares.

Writers: Maria Koklanaris & Holly Smith.

Illustrator: Joe Mignella.

# Prevent violence by working closely with the middle school



The headlines about school violence are scary. When your child hears about another troubled kid who has brought a weapon to school—or worse, used it—he may become frightened.

However your child responds to the news of classroom violence, use the episode as a conversation starter. Ask about the environment at his school. Does he feel safe there? Has he ever felt threatened? Has he seen students acting violently?

To be part of the solution to the violence-in-schools problem:

- **Get involved** in school violence-prevention programs. Many school districts offer these

programs. See if your preteen's school does, too. If it does, find out how you can pitch in. If there's no such program in place, explore how to start one.

- **Take threats seriously.** Many students who commit violence at school give clues about what they're planning. If your preteen mentions how a classmate threatened to "blow the teacher away," don't dismiss it as an idle threat. Go to the principal and share the information. Who knows? Your actions may keep your preteen's school out of the newspaper.

Source: Alvin Poussaint, M.D., "Fears About School Violence," Family Education, <http://school.familyeducation.com/school/safety/38467.html?detoured=1>.

# Look ahead to the next stage in your child's career—high school



Two-thirds of the school year is gone. Now a big transition looms for many middle schoolers and their parents. High school is six months away. Start preparing your child and yourself.

Expect your child to:

- **Feel excitement** about the opportunities high school offers. These include new friendships and more freedom. High school also lets students pursue a wide range of interests through extracurricular activities.
- **Feel nervous.** Standards for academics, behavior and independence are far beyond what most middle schoolers are used to. Then there's the size of high school—a school building and population that may be double what your child has now.

You can help if you:

- **Tap available resources.** Most middle schools give guidance about coping in high school. The high school, too, will likely offer orientation sessions for new students. Urge your child to attend.
- **Talk to your child.** Share some of your own high school memories. Discuss honestly the classes your child wants to take and how she will manage her schedule. Have her 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 her know you are proud of her and are looking forward to this new stage.

Source: Elizabeth Johnson, "Parent Involvement Essential to Successful Middle School Transition to High School," EduGuide, [www.eduguide.org/Parents-Library/Middle-School-Transition-High-School-2288.aspx](http://www.eduguide.org/Parents-Library/Middle-School-Transition-High-School-2288.aspx).

**Q:** My sixth grader's school dropped P.E. this semester, but without it, she doesn't exercise at all. How can I get her moving again?

## Questions & Answers

**A:** By walking the walk instead of just talking the talk! In other words, by making exercise part of your life, too. If you tell your child to get up and move while you veg out on the couch, it won't mean much to her. But if you slip on your sneakers and start working up a sweat? She'll get the message!

To make physical fitness a regular part of your routine:

- **Rethink your downtime.** Everyone enjoys doing nothing sometimes. But it shouldn't be your default position. Instead, find other ways to relax. If you and your child have been stuck behind desks all day, you both need to move your muscles.

*Get your blood pumping and feel the day's stress melt away.*

So go outside and throw a ball around. Shoot some baskets together. Get your blood pumping and feel the day's stress melt away.

- **Keep the car in the garage.** Don't automatically reach for the keys when it's time to run a quick errand. Instead, ask yourself, "Is it close by?" If the answer is yes, grab your child and your jacket and get going. Walk to the corner market for that loaf of bread. You'll be getting your groceries and some much-needed fresh air.

—Holly Smith,  
The Parent Institute

# It Matters: Reading

## Vocabulary is the key to reading success in school



In middle school, your child must read at a different level than he did in elementary school. Texts are more complex and contain advanced vocabulary. A broad and deep vocabulary will help your child. 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 or do his best to figure out their meaning through context clues.
- **Talking.** Make an effort to introduce new words when having a conversation with your child. This is a good exercise for everyone in the family. It may seem awkward at first. But it is worth making a habit of 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. Contact his teachers and let them in on your efforts so they can help him put his words into practice as well.

Source: Catherine Snow, "Building vocabulary to improve reading in middle school," Harvard Graduate School of Education, [www.gse.harvard.edu/blog/uk/2009/05/building-vocabulary-to-improve-reading-in-middle-school-2.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/blog/uk/2009/05/building-vocabulary-to-improve-reading-in-middle-school-2.html).

## Encourage pleasure reading with series books, recordings

Inspire your middle schooler to love books and you may create a lifelong reader! To encourage her to read for pleasure:

- **Follow her cues.** Pay attention to the things your middle schooler loves and look for books about those things. Whether she adores spaceships, sports or unicorns, there are bound to be stories all about them.
- **Consider a series.** If your middle schooler becomes enthralled with the first book in a series, she'll likely want to stick with it to the end. Ask your local librarian for preteen-friendly options.
- **Think outside the book.** For a change of pace, let your middle schooler listen to audio books



occasionally. She'll still be exposed to stories. But she'll get to enjoy them in a whole new way!

Source: Jamie Watson, "Motivating Pre-Teen Girls to Read," AdLit.org, [www.adlit.org/ask-the-experts/22858](http://www.adlit.org/ask-the-experts/22858).

## Prior knowledge affects ability to understand, relate to text



Research shows your child's ability to understand and relate to what he reads is linked to what he knows before he turns that first page. This is called "prior knowledge."

Prior knowledge is important because having some knowledge before reading means your child will not have to try to figure out the text just from the information in front of him. Prior knowledge of a topic may also keep him more engaged in what he's reading.

Here's how you can help:

- **Encourage your child to read a newspaper every day.** This will

expose him to topics and themes that he will likely encounter in his schoolwork.

- **Expand your child's world.** Take trips to museums and zoos. Also look for free or low-cost shows. Every bit of culture your child soaks up may help him make a connection with something he'll read in the future.
- **Share experiences with your child.** Talk with your child about places you have been or jobs you have had.

Source: Karen Kuelthau Allan and Margery Staman Miller, *Literacy and Learning: Strategies for Middle and Secondary School Teachers*, ISBN: 0-395-74646-9 (Houghton Mifflin, [www.eduplace.com](http://www.eduplace.com)).