

Middle School Parents[®]

December 2009
Vol. 13, No. 4

A Service of the Newton County Schools

still make the difference!



Use conversation, questions to boost your child's thinking skills

T rue, your preteen may do well in school. But what kind of thinker is she? Can she tackle a tricky assignment in a clever way? Does she weigh all sides of an issue before picking a position? Will she give a reasoned opinion about something when asked?

If the answers are *no, no and no*, don't worry! Like other skills, your preteen's thinking skills can be nurtured and sharpened over time. To do just that:

- **Engage your child in conversation.** Don't gloss over the issues of the day when sitting down to dinner. Really discuss them. Encourage your child to ask questions about the things she sees online or hears at school. It may prompt her to consider those topics more deeply.

- **Ask open-ended questions.** When possible, avoid asking your preteen yes-no questions. Instead, ask things that are more likely to lead to a thoughtful response. "What did your history teacher have to say about the election?" may result in a more creative answer than, "Did you talk about anything in school today?"
- **Avoid quizzes.** Boosting your preteen's critical-thinking skills shouldn't seem like school. So don't make her feel as if you're testing her. Rather, keep your exchanges casual and friendly.

Source: Elizabeth Shaunessy, Ph.D., "Enhancing Critical-Thinking Skills in Children: Tips for Parents," Duke Gifted Letter, www.dukegiftedletter.com/articles/vol6no4_feature.html.

Turn your middle schooler into a lifelong reader



Kids who like to read tend to become lifelong bookworms. To encourage your child's love of reading:

- **Make it easy for him** to discover new books. Whether it's a ride to the library or time on your laptop to browse booksellers, offer your child plenty of chances to explore new titles. If he's not sure where to start, give him a nudge. "I heard about this cool book. Let's see if we can find it."
- **Surround him with words.** Of course you should have paperbacks and hardcovers around the house. But don't forget about magazines, newspapers, maps and crossword puzzles.
- **Follow his lead.** Is your middle schooler gushing about an awesome novel he's halfway through? Ask if you can read it next. Letting him introduce you to a book he enjoys will inspire him to keep reading.
- **Find a reading club.** See if your library or local bookstore offers a reading club for preteens. Chatting about books with his peers may make your middle schooler's own love of stories that much stronger.

Know how to talk *with* your middle schooler about school



As a parent, it is both your right and your responsibility to know how your child is doing at school. But trying to get this information from your child can be, as the old saying goes, “like pulling teeth.”

With a little information and preparation, you can have an actual conversation about school with your child. Here's how:

- **Stop drilling your child** about homework. Not only does your child dislike it, but it contributes to a negative attitude about homework. Let your child use the first 20 minutes at home to settle in and have a snack. Save your (gently-worded) homework questions for after that.
- **Be specific.** If your child can answer you with one word, she will. Example: “How was school today?” “Fine.” Instead, say

something like: “I know you worked hard preparing for those essay questions on your history test. How did you answer the first one?”

- **Encourage your child** to advocate for herself. If your child is having trouble, your first thought may be to tell her not to worry—you'll call or email the teacher. But you're not the one who is struggling—your child is. So instead, say “Let's brainstorm some ways for you to approach Ms. Johnson about getting extra help in English class.”

Source: Emily Graham, “Have a Conversation About School,” SchoolFamily.com, www.schoolfamily.com/school-family-articles/article/733-have-a-conversation-about-school.

“I don't believe professional athletes should be role models. I believe parents should be role models.”

—Charles Barkley

Try to understand your middle schooler's need for a best friend



Parents are sometimes surprised by the strength of middle school friendships. A middle schooler's focus may seem to shift away from his family. He may even want to bring his best friend with him to family gatherings. Parents may feel as if they are somehow being replaced.

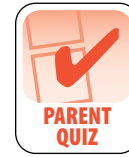
Rest assured you're not. Your child's bond with his best friend is not happening because he doesn't love his family. It's happening because, now more than ever, he needs someone who is going through the same kinds of things

he is going through. Best friends talk about physical changes, the opposite sex and how their peers view them, among other things. Knowing that a friend has similar concerns helps your child feel “normal.”

So be as understanding as possible about your child's friendship. Make your child's friend feel welcome. It will mean the world to your child. It will also help him develop into a more secure and confident person.

Source: Donald E. Greydanus, ed., *The American Academy of Pediatrics: Caring For Your Adolescent Ages 12 to 21*, ISBN: 0-553-07556-X (Bantam Books, www.randomhouse.com/bantamdell).

How well are you coping with your middle schooler?



The middle school years are a time of tremendous change. It's hard to be prepared for your child's rapid growth, frequent mood swings and various needs.

How well are you coping with it all? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

- ___ **1. Are you involved** with your child's education and in his life? Your child doesn't need you to hover, but he still *needs* you.
- ___ **2. Do you understand** that your child is going through many physical and emotional changes? Don't take all his words and actions personally.
- ___ **3. Do you speak** to your child on a higher level than you did when he was younger?
- ___ **4. Do you realize** that your child has a great need to be accepted by his peers at this age?
- ___ **5. Do you refuse** to compromise when it comes to safety, but try to be flexible with other limits?

How well are you doing?

Mostly *yes* answers means you are coping well with your changing child. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

Middle School Parents
still make the difference!

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
by The Parent Institute®, a division of NIS,
Inc., an independent, private agency.
Equal opportunity employer.
Copyright © 2009 NIS, Inc.

Publisher: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.

Editor: Rebecca Miyares.

Writers: Maria Koklanaris & Holly Smith.

Illustrator: Joe Mignella.

Review the art of being a good guest with your middle schooler



Chances are your child will spend part of the winter break visiting family members, friends or both. Now that your child is in middle school, people will expect more adult-like behavior than they did when she was younger.

Take this opportunity to make sure your child knows how to be a good guest. A child who knows how to behave in someone's home usually knows how to behave at school, too. Remind your child to:

- **Greet the host or hostess** with a friendly hello when she arrives.
- **Use manners.** Say *please* and *thank you* a lot.

- **Be gentle with possessions** of others and ask for permission before handling them.
- **Be helpful.** Offer to set or clear a table. Hang up a coat.
- **Be mindful of house rules**, such as taking off shoes at the door. This may be different from your house rules. However, at another person's home, she should respect the wishes of the host.
- **Thank the host** for inviting her when she says good-bye. If she received a gift, she should also send a thank-you note.

Source: Alex J. Packer, *The How Rude! Handbook of Family Manners for Teens: Avoiding Strife in Family Life*, ISBN: 1-57542-163-1 (Free Spirit Publishing, www.freespirit.com).

Find out how your child learns best and make the most of it



Just as no two kids are exactly alike, no two kids learn in exactly the same way. Instead, they tend to move toward a particular “learning style.”

While research shows there are at least eight such styles, the most common include:

- **Visual learning.** Kids who learn visually do best when they can see a lesson. Whether it's looking at charts or watching the teacher draw diagrams, they absorb information with their eyes.
- **Auditory learning.** Some kids can simply hear information and retain it. These “auditory learners” may be able to absorb new knowledge just by listening to a teacher explain a lesson or new concept.
- **Kinesthetic learning.** Kids who prefer hands-on learning do best when they're performing a task. Conducting a science experiment,

for example, is a good way for kinesthetic learners to grasp an idea.

Though you might prefer one learning style over another, you can't force your preteen into a certain style. To help your child make the most of the one he leans toward:

- **Define it.** Learn more about learning styles yourself. Then talk to your preteen about what you've found. Ask him to think about his own study habits, and see if it helps him define his learning style.
- **Embrace it.** Once you've figured out your preteen's learning style, find ways for him to use it. For instance, is he an auditory learner? Then hearing you read his notes might be a perfect way for him to prepare for a test.

Source: Kate Thomsen, M.S., C.A.S., *Parenting Preteens with a Purpose*, ISBN: 1-57482-199-7 (Search Institute Press, www.search-institute.org).

Q: My seventh grader relies on me way too much when it comes to school. She expects me to remind her about assignments, gather supplies for her and tell her when it's time to study. How can I stop being her personal assistant and help her take more responsibility for her learning?

Questions & Answers

A: Middle school is as much about growing up—and becoming more responsible—as it is about academics, so it's important that your child learn to rely more on herself and less on you. Here's how to help her do it:

- **Talk to your child.** Say, “I appreciate that you want my help with school stuff, but you're leaning on me too much. We need to start shifting the responsibility off me and onto you.”
- **Devise a plan.** Find ways for your child to be accountable for her assignments. “Instead of me reminding you to do your homework, let's set aside the hour before dinner for work time. When five o'clock rolls around, it's up to you to head to your desk.”
- **Give your child the tools** she needs. Make sure your child has a calendar or planner where she can keep track of assignments. Stock up on school supplies, too.
- **Stand back.** Give your arrangement time to work. Your child may stumble—or forget an assignment or two—as she gets used to her new role, but resist the urge to swoop in and rescue her.

—Holly Smith,
The Parent Institute

It Matters: Building Character

Self-discipline will help your child persevere



Perseverance is the ability to stick with a task or continue with a goal even when things get rough. Without it, your child's success in school, and in life, will be greatly limited.

To encourage perseverance:

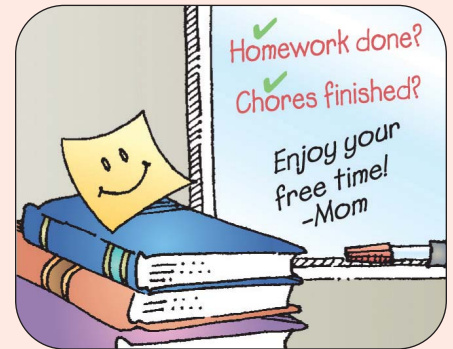
- **Advise your child on a goal.** Suppose your child has a goal of raising a grade from a C to a B this quarter. He plans to reach this by studying 30 minutes each night. Leave the studying to your child. But encourage him to come to you and report success each time he puts in the 30 minutes. Applaud him for doing it on his own. Tell him how proud you are of the way he is growing up.
- **Emphasize practice.** Each time your child practices getting better at anything, he is showing an ability to persevere. Sometimes the thought of a lot of practice is overwhelming. Emphasize small steps. This week, he can practice three math problems a night. When this is comfortable, he can move up to four or more.
- **Waste less time.** Too much TV, social time on the computer, phone and texting are distractions that can hold your child back. Make a deal that you will each cut back on a time-waster for 10 minutes a night. Use the time to do something productive. Later, consider cutting back 15 minutes a night.

Source: Barbara A. Lewis, *What Do You Stand For? For Teens: A Guide to Building Character*, ISBN: 1-57542-0239-5 (Free Spirit Publishing, www.freespirit.com).

To teach your middle schooler respect, lead by example

You can always talk to your pre-teen about respect, but he'll likely grasp the concept more quickly if you show him what it looks like. In other words, teach respect by modeling it! Here's how:

- **Value your child's opinions.** You're the parent and you're in charge. But that doesn't mean you can't let your preteen speak his mind (within reason). Show respect by listening to him.
- **Take an interest in your child's life.** Find out who your preteen's friends are. Ask about what everyone's learning in school. Show your preteen that his daily life matters to you.



- **Acknowledge your child's maturity.** As your child becomes more responsible, make sure your house rules reflect it. Give him chances to earn more freedom.

Source: "Parenting a Preteen," Palo Alto Medical Foundation, www.pamf.org/preteen/parents/parenting.html.

Encourage your middle schooler to develop good judgment



When you trust your child, you have faith that she will "do the right thing" most of the time. The first step toward this is knowing what the "right thing" is. This process is judgment, and it develops over time.

Here are two ways to guide your child toward good judgment:

1. **Give your child increasing amounts of responsibility for school routines.** Start with a basic habit, such as bedtime. She knows what time she needs to get up for school. Tell her you will let her judge for herself a reasonable hour to get to bed. If this goes well, allow her to exercise judgment over another area

of her life. If it doesn't go well, ask her what she has learned from the experience (for example, she feels like falling asleep in her first class). Work out a new plan with her, and try again.

2. **Discuss situations in advance.** What would she do if friends who had been drinking wanted her to get into a car they were driving? Your child probably knows not to get into the car, but kids often get flustered when presented with tough situations for the first time. Practicing with you will help her call upon her judgment skills and make a good decision.

Source: Neil I. Bernstein, *How to Keep Your Teenager Out of Trouble and What to Do If You Can't*, ISBN: 0-7611-1570-6 (Workman Publishing, www.workman.com).