

Middle School Parents[®]

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still make the difference!



Implement four basic steps for a successful year in middle school

Put your middle schooler on the path to school success! To help him start—and finish—strong this year:

1. **Maintain routines.** You relied on them when your middle schooler was a toddler, so don't abandon them now that he's nearly a teen. Routines give structure to his day and help him stay organized. So develop some commonsense school-year rituals and stick with them. Make sure you establish a morning, after-school and evening routine for your child.
2. **Get involved at school.** It's not always easy to stay connected to the middle-school classroom, but do it anyway. Getting involved shows your middle schooler that

his education matters. You don't need to be "Volunteer of the Year" or attend every PTA/PTO meeting. Just make an effort to participate when you can.

3. **Stay informed.** It's easy to miss the fliers or handouts stuffed in your middle schooler's backpack. So ask him every day whether he's brought anything home that you should see. The same goes for his schoolwork. Just skimming his notes can fill you in on what's happening in class.
4. **Support your child.** Your middle schooler may act like he's "too cool" to need your love and guidance, but he's not. Never miss a chance to give him a hug or tell him you love him.

Healthy habits support strong attendance



Your family habits greatly influence your child's attendance and readiness to learn.

Remember, your child can't learn properly if she's not in school. Nor can she learn if she's too groggy to concentrate.

Your child will start the school year right, and continue on a strong path, if you commit to the following routines:

- **Meals.** Your child will benefit from healthy food such as whole grains, produce and lean protein. Eat at least one meal a day as a family. Encourage breakfast, even if it is a piece of toast in one hand and a banana in the other as she runs out the door.
- **Exercise.** A strong body, fueled by regular activity, helps your child stay alert in school during the day.
- **A good night's sleep.** A routine that includes a set bedtime—one that allows about nine hours of sleep—is critical for getting your preteen up and out the door to school on time.

Source: Kerby T. Alvy, Ph.D., *The Positive Parent: Raising Healthy, Happy and Successful Children, Birth-Adolescence*, ISBN: 978-0-8077-4808-4 (Dually published by Teachers College Press and the Center for the Improvement of Child Caring, www.tcpress.com, www.ciccparenting.org).

Build your preteen's resiliency by sharing some family stories



You may not have a storied past, but share your past's stories with your preteen, anyway! That is, tell him about the things your family has dealt with over the years.

A recent Emory University study showed that kids who could retell family stories were less likely to be anxious or depressed. These kids were also less likely to act out from anger or frustration.

Why are family stories so powerful? It may be because hearing about relatives' struggles can help kids put their own issues in perspective.

To build your preteen's character by sharing family stories:

- **Find relevant tales.** Is the economy hitting your household hard? Chat with your child about how his great-grandparents fed their five children during the Great Depression. Giving him insight into ancestors' troubles—and

triumphs—during tough times may make his current situation seem not so bad.

- **Laugh.** Family tales don't need to be somber to be powerful. So find funny ones to share! Is your preteen cringing about a big history test? Tell him about that time Uncle Dan hid in a tree to get out of the science fair.
- **Don't lecture.** There's no need to hit your preteen over the head with every story's lesson. Instead, let the tales speak for themselves. And if you suspect he's not really listening? Take heart: Chances are, he hears you loud and clear.

Source: Sue Shellenbarger, "Life Stories: Children Find Meaning in Old Family Tales," *Wall Street Journal*, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123673699703791017.html>.

"The family is one of nature's masterpieces."

—George Santayana

Don't tolerate profanity; teach your middle schooler respect



Bad language is nothing new. People have been saying a "few choice words" for centuries.

Unfortunately, though, these days it seems like they are saying more than a few. And they say them at younger ages.

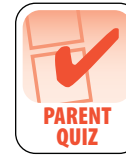
Curb profanity in your family. Just because it is more common than ever does not make it respectful. It's highly disrespectful. And using it can get your child disrespected by people who could make a positive difference in her future.

You can clean up your child's language if you:

- **Watch your own language.** Your child repeats what she hears, so use alternatives, such as "Oh, snap."
- **Stay calm** if you hear bad language from your child. Don't give your child the satisfaction of shocking you. Just say, "That word is offensive. Do not use it."
- **Create consequences.** Some families have a "swearing jar." When a family member curses, she must put a coin into the jar. When it's full, the money goes to charity.

Source: Jane Nelsen and others, *Positive Discipline: A Teacher's A-Z Guide: Hundreds of Solutions for Almost Every Classroom Behavior Problem*, ISBN: 0-7615-2245-X (Prima Publishing, www.primapublishing.com).

Do you know how to relate to your child's teachers?



The change from one teacher to several in middle school can be an adjustment for parents, too. Are you prepared to

connect with your child's teachers and set the stage for a good year?

Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

- ___ **1. Do you plan to meet each of your child's teachers in person?** Back-to-school night offers a perfect opportunity!
- ___ **2. Are you aware of teachers' expectations for your child?** Will you discuss these with your child?
- ___ **3. Are you aware of the amount of homework and tests your child will have this year?**
- ___ **4. Have you given teachers your phone number and email address?** Do you know how to contact them?
- ___ **5. Do you look for papers and notes from teachers and promptly sign and return them?**

How well are you doing?

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are ready for a productive year of good communication. For *no* answers, try those ideas from the quiz.

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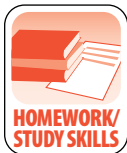
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Ask questions to improve your preteen's reading comprehension



Reading has always been an important part of your child's homework regimen. This intensifies in middle school.

Your child will have to read more complicated material to learn subject matter. She will also read longer and more complex novels.

You can support your child as she moves on to higher-level reading. One way is by asking questions to check on whether she seems to understand what she reads. You may want to send a note to her English teacher to share your perceptions of how she's doing, too.

You can improve reading comprehension if you help your child:

- **Make connections.** Especially when reading fiction at the middle school level, your child should have some "me, too" moments. Parts of the story should remind her of herself, someone she knows or an experience she has had. Ask a question such as, "The girl on

the cover of the book looks about your age. Does she do any of the same things you like to do?"

- **"See" the book.** Making pictures in your mind as you read is a wonderful way to improve understanding. Ask questions such as, "Where does the main character live? What do you think the place looks like?" Or, "What if you got to make the movie of this book? Who would you cast as the main character?"
- **Make predictions.** When your child understands a story, she will have some idea (or at least a good guess) of the direction the story is heading in. Ask, "You finished five chapters. What do you think is going to happen in the sixth?" Or, "So, did that book end the way you thought it would?"

Source: Laura Robb, *Teaching Reading in Middle School: A Strategic Approach to Teaching Reading That Improves Comprehension and Thinking*, ISBN: 0-590-68560-0 (Scholastic Professional Books, <http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/profbooks>).

Research shows what middle schooler's really want for dinner



What does your middle schooler really want for dinner? *You.*

Families live hectic lives. Sometimes, you may wonder whether gathering for a family meal is worth all the hassle. Maybe it would be easier to grab a quick bite in the car.

In fact, family meals make a huge difference. Research by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse found that kids who eat dinner with their families five or more nights a week were less likely to try cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana.

They're also twice as likely to get all A's.

Perhaps you can't schedule five dinners a week. But start with one or two. Turn off the TV and don't answer the phone. Spend time talking and listening to each other.

Over time, you'll learn things you never knew about your preteen. You'll have a stronger relationship. And you'll help your child be more successful in school and in life.

Source: "Family Matters: Substance Abuse and the American Family," National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, www.casacolumbia.org/Absolutenm/articlefiles/380-family_matters_report.pdf.

Q: My middle schooler and I spent so much of the last school year arguing over homework and scrambling to activities that we're both dreading the upcoming year. How can we make sure things go more smoothly this time around?

Questions & Answers

A: It might help to think of this year not only as a new year, but as a new start. In other words, remind yourself that this year doesn't have to be more of the same—it can be something altogether different (and better).

To make this school year more successful than the last, follow this three-step process:

1. **Make a list** of what went wrong before. With your child, write down last year's problem areas. Was your child new to middle school and having a hard time adjusting? Was the workload a shock to his system? Did he sign up for too many extra-curricular activities?
2. **Brainstorm solutions** with your child. Jot down ideas about how to tackle each item on your "What went wrong" list. If your child's workload overwhelmed him, the answer may be a more structured homework routine. If he was over-scheduled, decide which activities he should drop.
3. **Monitor your child's progress.** If you notice things gradually getting more frantic as the weeks go on, revisit (or redo) the list with your child. Just seeing your problem areas on paper is a valuable first step toward dealing with them.

Good luck this school year!

—Holly Smith,
The Parent Institute

It Matters: Responsibility

Ease into new middle school responsibilities



Even the most adaptable kids may find middle school a huge transition. So take time to talk to your child

about how he is feeling.

Research from the U.S. Department of Education reveals that most middle schoolers are concerned with:

- **Moving between classes.** Navigating a large school to find several different classrooms is challenging. With your child, learn the resources available. Can students walk through the school before it opens? Is there a map to follow? What if new students are late to classes in the first days of school? Many schools do not mark new students tardy at this time.
- **Managing lockers.** Before, your child had a familiar desk. Now he'll have a hallway locker. Many schools offer practice sessions for opening and closing lockers. Also reassure your child that teachers are used to helping new students deal with lockers in the early weeks of school.
- **Staying organized.** Organization tools are a *must* in middle school. Your child will need a notebook to track assignments. A large binder with dividers for different subjects can be a lifesaver. So can a calendar where he can mark the dates for tests and projects due. Monitor your child's use of these tools.

Source: Donna Schumacher, "The Transition to Middle School," Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), www.ericdigests.org/1999-2/middle.htm.

Plan ahead for your preteen's home-alone time after school

Is your preteen responsible enough to stay home by herself occasionally? If so, make her home-alone time as safe and structured as possible.

Here's how:

- **Spell out the rules** ahead of time. Is your preteen allowed to answer the phone while you're away? How about the door?
- **Keep a first-aid kit on hand.** Review its contents with your preteen.
- **Explain expectations.** Do you want your child to do her homework and chores before turning on the TV or computer?
- **Review kitchen safety.** If the oven is off-limits, what about the microwave? Is she allowed to use the teapot on the stove?



- **Make an evacuation plan.** Teach your child where to go in a fire or a weather emergency. Post important numbers by the phone.

Source: "Is Your Pre-Teen Ready To Stay Home Alone?" Parent.net, www.parent.net/article/archive/home-alone.shtml.

Teach your middle schooler how to handle money responsibly



Ask your preteen how much the latest video game costs and he'll rattle off the price.

But ask him how much he thinks a dentist visit costs and he'll give you a blank stare.

It's never too early—or too late—to show your child how to handle money responsibly.

Start by teaching your child that money is earned by tying his allowance to chores. If the chores aren't done, the money stays in your pocket—not his.

Once your middle schooler has some money, encourage him to

think first, spend later. He should ask himself three questions to prevent impulse purchases:

1. **Do I have the money for this?**
2. **Do I really need this?**
3. **Can I get it elsewhere for less?**

These questions will build important decision-making skills that will help him for the rest of his life. They will also help teach your child the value of a dollar—and may encourage him to start a savings account instead of adding to his video game collection.

Source: Crystal Paine, "Raising Financially Responsible Teens," MomAdvice, www.momadvice.com/parenting/financially_responsible_teens.aspx.