

# Helping Students Learn<sup>®</sup>

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



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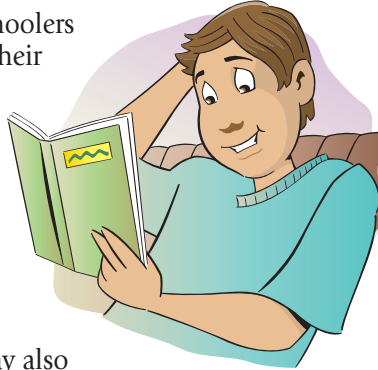
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Educational Service Unit 10

## A range of prior knowledge gives more meaning to reading

Reading is one of the main ways middle schoolers learn new things. And research shows that their ability to understand and relate to what they read is linked to what they already know—their *prior knowledge*.

When your child has some knowledge of a subject before he begins reading, he doesn't have to figure out everything about the text just from what's on the page. His prior knowledge gives him context to help him understand the new information. It may also keep him more engaged with what he's reading.



To help your child gain knowledge he can draw on when he reads:

- **Encourage him to read the newspaper.** Reading a wide variety of articles will expose him to topics and themes—from history to geography to science—that he will be likely to encounter in his school reading.
- **Broaden his world.** Attend museum exhibits and cultural events together. Each bit of culture your child experiences may help him make a connection to something he will read in the future. Look online or in the newspaper for free or low-cost options.
- **Share your experiences.** Your child can benefit from your prior knowledge, too! Talk with him about places you have been, historic events you remember and jobs you have had.

Source: R.C. Lent, *Overcoming Textbook Fatigue: 21st Century Tools to Revitalize Teaching and Learning*, Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.



## Encourage your child's leadership traits

Leadership skills help students achieve in school. So, what makes a good leader? Leaders must be able to give direction, but they must also listen, learn and be an example. To promote leadership, teach your child to be:

- **Caring.** Leaders look for ways to organize help for people who need it.
- **Open to new ideas.** Effective leaders know they don't know it all. They seek new facts and listen to the suggestions of others.
- **Organized.** Leaders plan ahead. They know that leaving projects to the last minute is likely to lead to less-than-satisfactory results.
- **Optimistic.** Leaders trust the people they work with. They expect that their plans will lead to success, and because of their leadership, they usually do.
- **Flexible.** Leaders don't insist on doing everything the same way every time. They are willing to try new things.

Source: B.A. Lewis, *What Do You Stand For? For Teens*, Free Spirit Publishing.

## Stay engaged for success

Your child may be growing up, but research shows that middle schoolers still benefit when their parents are involved in their education. To help your child succeed:

- **Give her opportunities** to make decisions and solve problems independently.
- **Set clear expectations** and monitor her activities and whereabouts.
- **Provide warm support** as she explores her interests and works toward her goals.

Source: N.E. Hill and M. Wang, "From Middle School to College: Developing Aspirations, Promoting Engagement, and Indirect Pathways From Parenting to Post High School Enrollment," *Developmental Psychology*, [nswc.com/msinvolve](http://nswc.com/msinvolve).

## Effective study takes time

End-of-year exams are not far off. Make sure your child plans plenty of time to study. Experts say that spacing study sessions out and reviewing the same material in multiple sessions is more effective than last-minute cramming. To the brain, a quick fill leads to a quick empty.



Source: J. Dunlosky and others, "Improving Students' Learning With Effective Learning Techniques: Promising Directions From Cognitive and Educational Psychology," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, [nswc.com/techniques](http://nswc.com/techniques).

## Ask questions that get your child thinking

The Socratic method of teaching involves asking questions to build critical thinking skills. It's a great way to help your child think about what he's learning. Ask things like:



- **Can you give me an example** to help me understand what you mean?
- **What makes you think so?** Is it because of what you've read or heard, or do you have other reasons?
- **Have you considered other ideas?** What are some different viewpoints?
- **What is this question** or problem really asking you to do?



## Can I stop the arguments by acting more like a friend?

**Q:** My daughter and I seem to argue about everything—schoolwork, friends, bedtime, you name it. Since she's growing older, should I back off as the authority figure and act more like a friend?

**A:** No. The fact is that your daughter is still your child and not your peer. Middle schoolers have friends. What they need are parents to support and guide them. They need limits. They need someone to teach them how to make good decisions, and to make good decisions for them when they aren't able to.

Your daughter is growing up, and you should listen to her opinions. But you should also:

- **Continue to set and enforce rules.** Middle schoolers don't need a long list of rules, but they still need a few important ones. Let your child have a say in deciding what the consequences will be for breaking the rules.
- **Give your child more independence** as she shows more responsibility. Offer guidance, but let her learn from the results of her choices.
- **Be kind to your child** and her friends, but act like an adult. Children lose respect for adults who act like children.
- **Make time for fun together.** You can maintain your role as an authority figure and still have some good times with your daughter.



## Are you helping your child resist negative peer pressure?

Negative peer pressure can affect your child's self-confidence, his schoolwork and even his safety. Are you helping your child react to negative peer pressure in positive ways? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

- \_\_\_ **1. Do you talk** with your child about doing the *right* thing rather than the *easy* thing?
- \_\_\_ **2. Do you role-play** ways your child can say *no* to things he knows are wrong?
- \_\_\_ **3. Have you made** your family rules clear? Does your child know that he can talk with you if he feels pressured to break them?
- \_\_\_ **4. Do you encourage** your child to think things through? "If you skip school with your friends, what might happen?"

- \_\_\_ **5. Do you empathize** with your child's desire to fit in?

### How well are you doing?

*More yes answers mean you're helping your child resist peer pressure. For each no, try that idea.*

"Parenting children during the 'tween years ... is like building a bridge that enables young persons to cross from childhood into adulthood."  
—William Sears, M.D.

## Get ready for high school!

Will your child be going to high school next year? She is probably excited about new opportunities and more freedom. At the same time, she may feel nervous about everything from academics to the size of the building. To ease her transition:

- **Seek resources.** Her guidance counselor can offer advice about high school. Find out if the high school will host an orientation for new students. Plan to attend.
- **Talk about high school.** Discuss the classes your child wants to take. Share your high school memories. Have her talk to current high school students, too.
- **Let her know you are proud** of her and are looking forward to this new stage.

## Set a vocabulary challenge

In middle school, your child is reading increasingly complex text that contains more vocabulary. But reading all these new words won't mean much if your child doesn't use them.



Challenge your child to use one or two new words a day. Repeated use will help fix them—and their meanings—in his mind.

## School skills are life skills

Help your child reinforce the skills she's learning at school by having her apply them to real-life tasks. Here are some ideas:

- **Enlist your child's help** with household math. It's nearly tax time. Could she help crunch numbers for your tax return? Be sure to check her work!
- **Develop her practical skills.** Let your child help you fix or build things. She'll have to follow directions, and she'll get real-life practice problem-solving.
- **Encourage her to use logic.** Are you trying to solve a Sudoku puzzle or create a budget? Get your child's input.

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