

# Helping Students Learn<sup>®</sup>

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



October 2016

Title I Cooperative  
Educational Service Unit 10

## Express expectations clearly to keep your child on the right track

Research shows that when parents have high and realistic expectations for their children, the children do better in school. Expressing your expectations clearly and specifically is a key part of the process.

With middle schoolers, vague expectations, like "Try hard in school," leave too much "wiggle room." To avoid giving your child a chance to interpret expectations to suit herself:



- **Speak in terms of what you expect.** Telling her what she must do can backfire, because you can't control her behavior. You can only control yours. "I expect you to complete your homework before you leave the house," is more effective than, "You'd better do your homework now."
- **Talk about your child's own expectations.** If she says she expects an A on her next test, have her tell you exactly how she plans to achieve it. Suggest that she put her plan in writing.
- **Talk about teachers' expectations.** For example, you might ask, "When Mrs. Jones tells you on Friday that you have a test on Monday, what does she expect?" If you get a blank look in return, supply the answer for your child. "She expects you to start reviewing the material right away so that you will be prepared on Monday."

Sources: J.M. Froiland and M.L. Davison, "Parental expectations and school relationships as contributors to adolescents' positive outcomes," *Social Psychology of Education*, [niscw.com/expect](http://niscw.com/expect); and J.J. Pawel, *The Parent's Toolkit: The Universal Blueprint for Building a Healthy Family*, Ambris Publishing.



## Encourage more complex thinking

Middle schoolers' brains are developing rapidly. Your child is now able to think in a more critical manner and understand more abstract ideas. To support his emerging thinking skills:

- **Discuss current events** with your child. Middle schoolers are interested in what is going on in the world. They often have strong opinions about what's wrong and ideas about how to fix things.
- **Ask for your child's views** on what is going on at home and at school. You don't have to agree with him. But give him the chance to tell you what he thinks, and why.
- **Encourage volunteer work.** Your child may give more thought to new ideas he's exposed to than if he simply reads about them.
- **Ask questions** about values. For example, "Is it ever OK to lie? Why or why not?" This helps as your child becomes less certain that there is always a "right" answer.

Source: M. Caskey and V.A. Anfara, Jr., "Developmental Characteristics of Young Adolescents: Research Summary," Association for Middle Level Education, [niscw.com/abstract](http://niscw.com/abstract).

## Plan for calm conferences

Middle schoolers have many teachers, so parent-teacher conference day can be hectic. To make the most of your meetings:

- **Jot down questions** ahead of time so you'll remember them. Trim your list to the ones that are most important.
- **Come with an open mind.** Don't let your child's stories about a teacher affect how you approach a meeting.
- **Listen before you talk.** If you hear something you don't understand, ask for clarification.

## Show your child what respect looks like in action

You'll go a long way toward helping your child be respectful if



you set an example. Here are some ways:

- **Be polite.** Don't barge into her room.
- **Be honest.** Admit your mistakes.
- **Be dependable.** If you tell your child you'll do something, do it.
- **Be fair.** Don't pass judgment before learning all the facts.

## Read for the fun of it

If reading isn't on your child's list of favorite things to do, help him see how enjoyable it can be. Here's how:



- **Set a daily family reading time.** Turn off the music, TV and computer. Don't force him to read, but relax with a book and see if he follows your lead.
- **Let him read things he likes.** Comic books might not be your choice, but if they inspire your child to read, they're OK.
- **Subscribe to a magazine.** There's bound to be one that matches your child's interests. And each new issue brings another opportunity to read.



## How should I respond to a poor report card?

**Q:** I dread report-card time. It always causes tension between me and my son. How can I talk to him about his sometimes-not-so-great grades without it turning into a fight?

**A:** Here's an approach to try. Instead of seeing report-card time as "evidence" of how your child is doing in school, look at it as a chance for both of you to think about his overall progress.

To use your child's report card to get the conversation started:

- **Control your emotions.** Does seeing a low grade on the report card make you angry? Your anger may make your child angry or defensive himself. Instead, approach the situation calmly—that will let you both concentrate on what you really want to say.
- **Evaluate your expectations.** Do you automatically assume a B- or a C+ is an awful grade? Instead, consider the context. Is this class especially tough? Is the subject matter entirely new to your child? Has he been going through a rough patch emotionally? These things matter when deciding whether a "bad" grade is due to lack of effort.
- **Ask him for his opinion.** How does your child feel about his grades? Does he think they reflect his efforts? What does he think he could do to improve them? Help him set goals and plan how to reach them.



## Are you forging a school connection?

Participating in school extracurricular activities can increase a student's feeling of connection to the school—and that can boost academic achievement. Are you encouraging your child to be involved? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

- \_\_\_ **1. Have you reviewed** the school activities together?
- \_\_\_ **2. Do you encourage** your child to participate in a club or activity that matches her interests?
- \_\_\_ **3. Do you support** your child if she wants to try a new activity that fits into her schedule?
- \_\_\_ **4. Do you encourage** your child to attend shows, games and social events at school?
- \_\_\_ **5. Do you urge** your child to take advantage of time with teachers after school?

### How well are you doing?

*More yes answers mean you are helping your child feel a part of the school. For each no, try that idea from the quiz.*

**"Character isn't inherited. One builds it daily by the way one thinks and acts, thought by thought, action by action."**

—Helen Gahagan Douglas

## Find some one-on-one time

The time you spend with your middle schooler creates a bond that supports his efforts in school. In addition to your usual day-to-day interactions, he needs time when you can focus on each other without distractions. Try these ideas:

- **Take an evening walk** together. Leave the headphones at home and talk.
- **Take your child to school**, or pick him up, once a week. Talk on the way.
- **Plan a meal** together on Saturday, and prepare it with your child on Sunday.
- **Run weekend errands** with your child. Stop for a snack and enjoy it—and the time—together.

Source: L. Sonna, Ph.D., *The Everything Tween Book*, Adams Media.

## Promote screen-free choices

There are positive aspects to today's electronic technology, from learning with apps to video chatting with Grandma. But more time spent in front of screens means less time for other things that matter.

So, offer your child alternatives. Go biking together. Act out a play. Show her that there are lots of ways to have fun—and engage her brain—without sitting in front of a screen.

## Take anxiety out of tests

Does your child suffer from test anxiety? Preparation is the cure. Share these tips:



- **Clarify.** Your child could ask the teacher what will be on the test. Having more information can give him more confidence.
- **Don't cram.** If he starts studying days in advance, he'll have time to get help if he doesn't understand something.
- **Take practice tests.** Help your child create one from his book and class notes.

### Helping Students Learn®

Published in English and Spanish, September through May.

Publisher: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.

Editor: Alison McLean.

Staff Editors: Rebecca Miyares & Erika Beasley.

Production Manager: Pat Carter.

Translations Editor: Victoria Gaviola.

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

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