

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



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Title I Cooperative

Educational Service Unit 10

Challenge your child to form opinions and think things through

Students spend a lot of time learning facts that are straightforward, such as names, dates and locations. But when a student gets to middle school—as your child has—he is also expected to develop skills such as critical thinking (also called higher-order thinking). To give your child some practice thinking about things in a deeper way:



- **Discuss the books** he has to read for school or any other reading he does. Ask questions such as: “What did you think was the most important part of the book? What do you think the author wanted to accomplish by writing it? Who was the most interesting character? Why?”
- **Watch TV together** once in a while. If the show is about teens, ask: “What would you have done if that were you? Why?” If you catch a commercial, say: “Did that make you want to buy that product? If you were selling the product, how would you make people want to buy it?”
- **Look for opportunities** around your home that require him to solve problems. For example: putting something together; making a simple meal from scratch, starting with coming up with a nutritious meal idea, writing down all ingredients and scheduling the timing of the cooking; being responsible for a pet; entertaining a younger child for a whole afternoon (as long as it does not interfere with schoolwork).

Source: P.B. Tanguay, “Thinking Skills,” NLD on the Web! niswc.com/middleschoolthinking.



Match your involvement to your child

Your involvement in your child’s education tells her you care about her and want her to do her best, that you place a high priority on education, and that you view your family and the school as partners. Keep in mind that:

- **Your child’s individual needs** play a role in your involvement, especially when she is studying and doing homework. If your child struggles in school, she may need more help from you. If not, let her know you are available, but leave it to her. No matter what, express interest in her work.
- **Even children who do well** in school may struggle with organization. Helping your child set goals or keep a calendar is always a good way to be involved.
- **Your child does not deserve** a reward for doing schoolwork. It is her responsibility. But she *does* deserve and need plenty of your encouragement.

Source: University of Michigan Department of Psychology, “How Parents Motivate their Children Academically: Parent Involvement,” http://sitemaker.umich.edu/356.benjamin/parent_involvement.

Lift your child out of a winter rut



One way to beat the February “blahs” and improve your child’s motivation and attitude is to make an ordinary day feel special. For example, say “I bought the ingredients for your favorite dinner. Do a little homework, and then come and help me make it.”

Build a better book report

She’s done the reading. Now it’s time for your child to make her book report sparkle! Remind her to:

1. **Start with the basics.** She should include the author, title and copyright date in the introduction.
2. **Briefly summarize** the main plot or subject matter. It should be an overview, not a description of the entire book.
3. **Make observations.** Did the story hold together? What might have made the book stronger? She should support opinions with examples from the text.
4. **Finish strong.** The conclusion is the place for her to emphasize her points, not introduce new ideas.

Source: “How to Write A Book Report,” Fact Monster, niswc.com/bookreport.

Self-care takes practice

Your middle schooler won’t morph into a responsible adult overnight. But he *can* take responsibility for getting ready for school. Your child should:



- **Wake up on time.** Have him set an alarm clock. If he hits “snooze” and dozes off again, put the clock across the room.
- **Pack his lunch.** Set some basic rules about what’s okay—or not okay—to pack. Insist he prepare it the night before.
- **Get forms signed.** Don’t go through his backpack; let him bring them to you.



How do I stop social issues from derailing my child?

Q: My child and her former best friend have grown apart. In fact, this girl didn't invite my child to her Valentine's Day party. My daughter is upset, and she can't concentrate on anything else. I want to help. Should I talk to the girl's parents?

A: Probably not. It's tough to watch your child grapple with fading friendships and other changes during middle school. But these transitions are a normal part of adolescence.

Assuming the former friend isn't bullying her (in which case, you must talk to the school), the best way to help your child over social bumps in the road is to:

- **Take them seriously.** Never tell your child her problems are "no big deal." They're a very big deal to her. And if she thinks you don't care, she may be less likely to share other concerns with you later. Be sure she knows you're on her side.
- **Shift her focus.** Don't let her mope just because she's not invited to a certain party or event. Find something fun to do instead. An impromptu movie night or trip to the pizza place can do a lot to lift her mood.

Remember: Social problems can become academic problems. So if you notice your child's grades slipping as she deals with friendship issues, talk to her guidance counselor about what to do.



Do you encourage polite behavior?

Middle school is a time when children often try out new ideas and behaviors. Some of these, however, can be very inappropriate and can get your child in trouble at school. Are you raising your child to be civil? Answer *yes* or *no*:

1. **Do you make it clear** that swearing, rudeness and name-calling are offensive and against your family's values? Do you make every effort to control your own language?
2. **Do you impose limits** on the clothing your child chooses, including prohibiting items that contain offensive language, pictures or symbols?
3. **Do you discuss** lyrics to popular songs, and ask your child not to repeat lyrics you find inappropriate?

4. **Do you insist** your child use proper hygiene? It shows respect for self and others.

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are teaching your child to act and speak civilly. For each no, try that idea.

*"We are apt to forget that children watch examples better than they listen to preaching."
—Roy L. Smith*

Texting: Send a message

Does your child send lots of text messages every day? Research suggests that the more students use "text-speak"—typing *gr8* for *great*, for example—the more likely they are to have poor grammar skills and trouble switching between texting and writing.

On the other hand, kids who are skilled texters are often good at thinking creatively and identifying *homophones*—words that sound the same but are spelled differently.

What should you do? Limit the time your child spends texting and remind him that texting and writing are two separate things!

Source: S.D. Sparks, "Duz Txtng Hurt Yr Kidz Gramr? Absolutely, a New Study Says," Education Week, nswc.com/txt.

Stop distractions before they stop your child

Studying requires concentration. If your child tends to get sidetracked, make an effort to:



- **Maintain quiet** during study time. Help siblings find something to do. Make your child's study area a TV- and phone-free zone.
- **Give her something to eat** and drink before she begins.
- **Pay attention** to whether anything is bothering her. Encourage your child to talk about it, and brainstorm solutions so she can study without worrying.

Source: J. Ban, *Parents Assuring Student Success (PASS): Achievement Made Easy By Learning Together*, Solution Tree Press.

Turn your child on to success

Everything from shifting hormones to shifting expectations can turn middle schoolers off in school. To keep your child on track:

- **Evaluate** his classes. They shouldn't be too easy or too hard.
- **Set** high but achievable goals.
- **Emphasize** your child's strengths.

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P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474

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