

Helping Students Learn[®]

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



March 2020

Dodson Middle School

Boost knowledge and skills to help your child read for meaning

Reading for meaning involves more than understanding the words on a page. Students also need to be able to identify the main idea and draw inferences (use evidence in the text to make conclusions that aren't directly stated). Many middle schoolers struggle with these tasks.

To strengthen your child's reading comprehension skills, help her:

- **Build prior knowledge.** Your child's ability to understand what she reads is linked to what she knows before opening the book. Encourage her to read news articles on all kinds of topics. Attend exhibits and cultural events as a family. Share your knowledge about places you've been or things you have experienced, too.
- **Ask questions before reading.** Have your child scan the headings, pictures and boldfaced text in a reading assignment. What questions do they raise in her mind? As she's reading, she can jot down other questions that come up. When she's finished reading, can she answer her questions?
- **Enlarge her vocabulary.** Encourage your child to write down new words she encounters, along with their meanings.
- **Increase fluency.** Reading faster and more easily aids understanding. Look for brief articles that will interest your child, and time her as she reads. Then challenge her to read at a faster pace and still grasp the main idea.



Source: M. Pressley, "Comprehension Instruction: What Works" Reading Rockets, niscw.com/read-meaning.



Employ emotions to promote learning

Emotions play a big role in the way middle schoolers see the world. That's because the part of the adolescent brain that processes emotions matures sooner than the part that handles rational thinking.

To engage your child's emotions and maximize his ability to learn:

- **Use humor.** Middle schoolers love to laugh and make jokes. Encourage your child to find funny cartoons, GIFs or videos about what he's learning.
- **Link learning to life.** Adolescents tend to think the world revolves around them. So help your child relate to what

he's learning. If he's studying the Revolutionary War, ask him to think about a time he felt like revolting against authority.

- **Put imagination to work.** Ask him questions like, "What would it have felt like to be with Washington at Valley Forge?"

Source: T. Armstrong, Ph.D., "Maximize the Power of the Middle School Brain," MiddleWeb, niscw.com/mid_brain.

Have fun with math facts

Students who lack a firm command of basic math facts often struggle to learn abstract concepts. Reinforce your child's fact recall with these games:

- **Hot potato.** Call out an equation (9×8) as you toss a ball to your child. Ask her to say the answer before she catches the ball.



- **Multiplication race.** Remove the face cards from a card deck. Each player turns over one card. The player who first says the product of the cards wins them.

Make study time count

Not all study strategies are equally effective. To help your child prepare for tests, suggest he use these research-proven techniques:

- **Self-quizzing.** Your child can make up his own questions, then answer them.
- **Summarizing** material in his own words.
- **Studying** in multiple short sessions, spaced out over time.
- **Studying** a variety of related material (different types of math problems) in a single session, rather than just one type.

Source: E. Kang, "5 Research-Backed Studying Techniques," Edutopia, niscw.com/study-tips.

Essential ways you can help

Here are three critical ways to stay involved and help your child achieve in school:

1. **Communicate** your expectations.
2. **Expand on** what's being taught. Help your child apply what she's learning.
3. **Talk about** the future. Help her investigate the education and training necessary to prepare for careers of interest.



Source: N.E. Hall and others, "Parental involvement in education during middle school," *Journal of Educational Research*, Taylor & Francis.



How can I plan an enriching 'staycation' for my child?

Q: My son insists that "everybody" is going away for spring break. I have taken the week off from work, but we are staying home. How can we make the most of our week without breaking the bank?

A: It is likely that "everybody" won't really be heading off on fancy trips. But you are wise to plan a few entertaining—and even educational—ways to spend time with your child during your week off.

Consider these ideas:

- **Shadow a professional.** Does your child love animals? See if you can arrange a day where he can volunteer or observe at a nearby veterinary clinic.
- **Be tourists at home.** What draws visitors to your area? What museums and parks showcase local treasures? Do some exploring with your child and try seeing your hometown with fresh eyes.
- **Visit a nearby college.** If you don't want to schedule a formal tour, just walk around campus and check out the library and student union.
- **Host a movie night.** See if your child can find a school friend who is also home for the break. Invite him over for pizza, popcorn and movies.
- **Plan a "vacation day."** For 24 hours, give your child a break from chores and routines. Let him sleep in, stay up late and eat a favorite meal.



Are you reducing peer pressure's power?

Middle schoolers care a lot about their friends' opinions. But peer influence can often lead them astray. Are you teaching your child to rely instead on her own good judgment when making decisions? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

- ___ **1. Do you discuss** the importance of doing the *right* thing, rather than the *easy* thing?
- ___ **2. Do you help** your child think things through? "If you skip last period with your friends, what might happen?"
- ___ **3. Do you make sure** your child understands your family rules?
- ___ **4. Do you sympathize** with your child about the desire to fit in? Does she know she can talk to you if she feels pressured by friends?

- ___ **5. Do you help** your child practice saying *no* to things she knows are wrong?

How well are you doing?

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

"It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are."

—E.E. Cummings

Encourage leadership traits

Many of the qualities that make someone a good leader also boost school success. To nurture your middle schooler's inner leader, encourage him to:

- **Welcome new ideas.** Leaders know they can learn from others.
- **Be flexible.** It doesn't always work to do everything the same way. Sometimes it helps to try a different approach.
- **Get organized.** Leaders plan ahead.
- **Show enthusiasm,** and be optimistic that with his effort, things will go right.

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

Hold an after-test review

Your child is used to being tested on what she's learned. But does she know that a test is also a *way* to learn? Encourage her to:

- 1. Make notes** as soon as possible after the test. What was easy? What is she still confused about?
- 2. Correct any errors** and keep the test as a study guide for midterms or finals.
- 3. Analyze mistakes.** Were they careless? Or should she have studied more?

Help your child use this information to plan ways to study more effectively next time.

Enter the high school zone

If your child will be moving up to high school in the fall, smooth his transition by helping him:



- **Find answers.** Suggest that he discuss questions or concerns with his school counselor.
- **Think ahead.** Discuss classes he wants to take. Have him ask current students about their experiences.
- **Feel confident.** He's achieving a huge milestone! Tell him you're proud of him.

Helping Students Learn®

Published in English and Spanish, September through May.

Publisher: Doris McLaughlin.

Publisher Emeritus: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.

Editor: Alison McLean.

Staff Editors: Rebecca Miyares & Erika Beasley.

Production Manager: Sara Amon.

Translations Editor: Victoria Gaviola.

Copyright © 2020, The Parent Institute®,

a division of PaperClip Media, Inc.

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

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