

Middle Years

Working Together for School Success



Short Stops

I'm hopeful that...

Students who feel hopeful about the future tend to be more motivated and earn better grades. To foster hopefulness in your child, suggest that she write down her dreams for the near and distant future (making the lacrosse team, becoming a chef). She can start working toward them by setting goals for herself.

A day in the life

What do 24 hours look like in your home? Throughout one day, let your tween shoot video clips of family members enjoying a meal, laughing together, or walking the dog. Or he might take photos of these moments and make a slide show. Watch his creation together—he'll practice presentation skills and spend time with family.

Safe after school

Now that your child is in middle school, you may wonder whether she can stay home alone after school. Check your state law or guidelines, and consider your tween's maturity level. If she is going to be home without you, be sure she knows what to do (call or text you, start homework) and what not to do (use the stove, chat online).

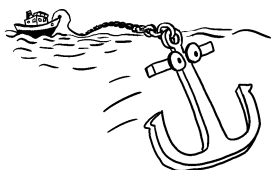
Worth quoting

"Think for yourself, and let others enjoy the privilege of doing so, too."
Voltaire

Just for fun

Q: What do you throw out when you use it and take back when you don't need it?

A: An anchor.



Focused and ready to learn

Does your child like the idea of being his own boss? Tell him congratulations—he has a job! Managing his schoolwork is his responsibility, and he's in charge. Here are ways he can stay focused on this important role.

In class

It's a good idea for your tween to keep only what he needs on his desk. If he's allowed to pick his seat, he might choose a spot close to the teacher and away from windows, doors, and kids who like to talk a lot. And if he uses a laptop or tablet for classwork, he should close non-academic apps and windows so he's not tempted to play a game or check social media sites.

Study time

When your middle grader studies, he can use strategies to avoid interruptions. For example, he could hang up a "Do Not Disturb" sign, ask you to keep his siblings occupied, or go work at the library. Have him put electronics in another room when he's not using them to study. Also, he should pay attention to how he works and consider ways to focus better. If he tends to fidget, he



might walk around or squeeze a stress ball while he reads.

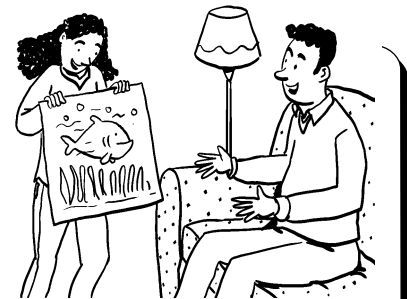
Everyday planning

To keep schoolwork front and center, encourage your child to record assignment deadlines in an agenda book or on a calendar as soon as he gets them. He can add commitments like practices and meetings, too. Then, he should review his plan each week to see what's coming up and make adjustments as needed. 👍

School: A hot topic

One of the best ways to support your tween's education is to make it a regular topic of conversation. Try these ideas:

- Let your child teach you something she's learning. If she tells you about the Lewis and Clark expedition, for instance, have her trace the explorers' route on a map for you.
- Think of questions that lead to more than one-word answers. *Examples:* "What was the most surprising thing you learned today?" or "What were the other kids' speeches about?"
- Focus on her favorites—she may have more to say about the things she enjoys most. So if she loves art, let her show you her latest painting or sculpture and describe the technique she used. 👍



Engineer that!

If your middle schooler is creative and likes to solve problems or help people, engineering could be the perfect career for her. Suggest that she tinker with engineering projects like these to see what she thinks:

- Let your tween try her hand at engineering a contraption to move a marble across a room—the way *automotive engineers* work on designing cars to move people. Like an engineer, she should design, test, and redesign until she's satisfied with her model.
- Using drinking straws and other household materials, can your middle schooler build a “hand” that could type keys on



a computer for someone with a physical disability? Maybe she'd like to be a *bio-medical engineer*—they invent devices to help people with disabilities or other health concerns.

- A *packaging engineer* creates packing materials for products. Encourage your child to

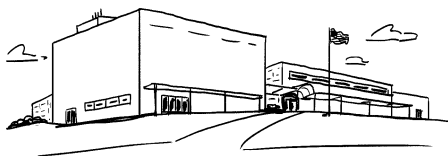
build the strongest box possible out of a single sheet of paper. She could test (and retest) it by filling it with pennies. The more pennies her box can hold, the stronger it is. 👍



Q & A Say no to skipping class

Q Last year, my son skipped class a few times. How can I make sure he doesn't do it again this year?

A Skipping class can become a habit and is even a risk factor for dropping out of high school. Kids skip for a variety of reasons, such as struggling in school, being bullied, or experiencing peer pressure.



Talk to your son about why he skipped and how to make this year different. Offer help for any problems he's having, and tell him he can always talk to you, his teachers, or the school counselor.

Then, remind him of the consequences he experienced for skipping class last year, such as detention or zeroes for assignments. And let him know you expect him to be in school all day, every day this year unless he has an excused absence. 👍

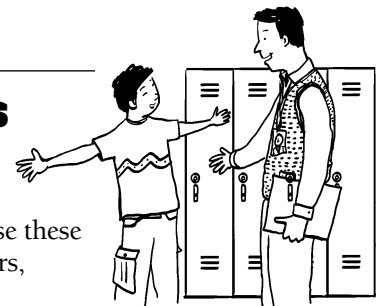
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Build good relationships

Whether in school now or in the workplace later, your tween will need to get along with people in authority. Encourage him to use these “people skills” when working with his teachers, coaches, or club advisors.



Listen well. Your middle grader should pay close attention when adults give directions. Being a good listener will help him know what he needs to do to follow through—a key way to build trust in any relationship.

Have perspective. Help your child see things from an adult's point of view. Maybe the teacher assigned him a project partner he's not happy with. Suggest that he consider why. (Perhaps the teacher hoped he would be a nice role model for the other student.)

Be cooperative. Focusing on the greater good can help your middle grader be a team player. Maybe he wants to run sound and lights for the school play, but the advisor asks him to make publicity posters. Changing gears will show he's willing to help—and teach him to be adaptable. 👍

Parent to Parent Walking tall

My daughter Marley started feeling insecure about her looks when she began middle school. She complained that other girls were thinner or prettier. I remembered feeling the same way at her age, so I asked my mother to remind me how we handled it.

My mom said she helped me put my energy into looking and feeling my best instead of comparing myself to others. She had some nice suggestions for my daughter.

Marley has acne, like I did, so we shopped for skin care

products and found one that's helping. And we looked through her closet for outfits she feels good in. For example, she's more comfortable wearing skirts and dresses when she pairs them with colorful leggings. Finally, I suggested

that she use a journal to write about her strengths and the accomplishments she's proud of.

I know the middle school years can be a long haul. But I think Marley is feeling a little better about herself, and I hope that will continue. 👍



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Short Stops

Language lessons

Is your child learning a foreign language this year?

Plan a special dinner with foods from the country he's studying. *Example:* Eat gazpacho and paella if he's learning Spanish. Have him teach you words and phrases for passing food and saying "please" and "thank you." Consider doing this each quarter—he'll be proud to show you his progress.

A good sport

Explain to your tween that by showing good sportsmanship, she will represent herself—and her school—in a good light. When she's in the stands, encourage her to respect players, coaches, and referees. For instance, instead of booing to disagree with a call, she might cheer, "The next goal is yours!"

It's private

As middle graders get older, they become more private. Try not to take it personally—it's natural for your child to want some time alone. In fact, increased privacy often signals growing maturity. Honor your tween's privacy by knocking before entering his room. If he shares a room, help him find places or times he can have privacy.

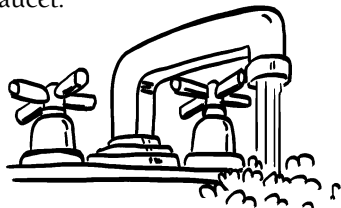
Worth quoting

"Nothing can dim the light which shines from within." *Maya Angelou*

Just for fun

Q: What runs but can't walk?

A: A faucet.



Homework problems—solved

Homework is part of your middle grader's daily routine, but stressing about it doesn't have to be. Try these ideas to handle common dilemmas.

Problem: Your child puts off homework until the last minute.

Solution: One reason students procrastinate is that they feel overwhelmed. Suggest that your tween decide in what order to do her work so she knows where to start and what to do next. Also, encourage her to put steps in her planner for big tests or long-term assignments. That way, she can tackle them one at a time. *Example:* "Review notes, make a study guide, quiz myself for a test."

Problem: She rushes to finish homework.

Solution: Requiring a set amount of daily study time may keep your child from hurrying through math to watch TV or meet her friends. Ask teachers how much time she should spend on homework each day (typically 60–90 minutes in the middle grades). Let your youngster know her work isn't done until she double-checks it and corrects



mistakes. With leftover homework time, she might read, do extra-credit assignments, or work ahead on projects.

Problem: She gets frustrated when she's stuck.

Solution: Have your middle grader make a list of resources to turn to if she's stumped. She could list phone numbers of classmates or older students, along with information for homework hotlines or websites. Suggest that she check the public library or community center to see if they offer homework help. If she's still having trouble, she can ask her teacher the next day. 👍

Nice save!

When your child earns or receives money, he may be tempted to spend it all. Teaching him to save will start a valuable habit. Consider these tips.

■ **Make it automatic.** Discuss what percentage of money he should set aside. Have him put that amount in a savings account when he gets money for odd jobs, allowance, or gifts. Explain that this will help him save for big purchases like a new bike.

■ **Stick to the plan.** If he's thinking about dipping into his savings, he can ask himself whether he would rather have a new video game now or a bike later. To stay motivated, he might hang a picture of the bike he wants and imagine himself riding it.

■ **Stretch what's left.** Your child's spending money will go further if he looks for ways to do things for less. He could borrow a book from the library instead of buying one, for example. 👍



Dealing with cyberbullying

The digital world has opened up a whole new realm for bullying. Help your middle grader stay safe with this advice.



1. Explain that what may seem like common online behavior can be cyberbullying. If friends post or share embarrassing photos or videos of others, classmates spread rumors on cell phones, or peers send hurtful messages via social media, that's crossing a line. If done purposely and repeatedly, it's considered cyberbullying.

2. Point out that what happens online may have serious, real-life consequences. A humiliating photo gone viral could cause the victim to stay away from friends or hurt himself. And the bully can get into trouble at home, at school, or even with the law.

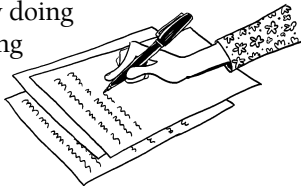
3. Go over rules. Your middle grader should avoid doing or saying anything online that he wouldn't do or say in person. Encourage him to think about how someone might feel before he texts or posts.

4. Tell your tween not to respond to a bully. It may make the situation worse. Have him save, print, or take a screen shot of the post to keep a record of what happened. Then, he should block the sender and tell you what happened so you can decide what to do, such as notifying your Internet service provider or the school. 👍

Q & A Writing for pleasure

Q My daughter used to enjoy writing, but now she sees writing assignments as a chore. How can I help her find the joy in it again?

A Your child might rediscover her enjoyment by doing creative writing activities that don't have grades attached.



For example, suggest that she write and decorate an inspiring poem to put inside her locker. Or she could make up funny captions for photos and share them with family.

She can even write with friends by having a paper "snowball fight." One person writes an opening sentence of a story on a piece of paper, crumples it, and tosses it to another player. That person adds a sentence, re-crumple the paper, and tosses it again. Keep writing, crumpling, and tossing until the page is full. Then, read the story aloud.

Writing for fun may take the pressure off and unleash her imagination. And that can help her loosen up and enjoy written assignments in school more. 👍

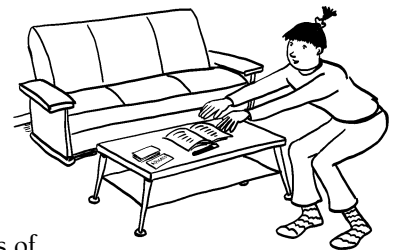


Fit in fitness

With school in full swing, your child probably has many demands on her time, and she may not be thinking about staying fit. Here are easy ways to add activity into her day.

Start a 60/30 challenge. Doing 60 minutes of activity a day for 30 days might kick-start a fitness habit. The hour can be spread throughout the day (30-minute dance class + 10-minute walk to a friend's house + 20-minute bike ride after dinner). Have her record her totals.

Make a "random activities" pile. Your tween could brainstorm exercises to do for 1–2 minutes, such as squats, push-ups, or sit-ups. She can write them on index cards and leave the cards by her desk and the TV. During homework breaks and commercials, she should draw one and do what it says. She might note on the back how many she completed and try for more next time. 👍



Parent to Parent Work your way to success

My son Blake was surprised and disappointed when he auditioned for seventh-grade band and wasn't placed in the highest level. Until then, he had done well at whatever he tried. He wasn't prepared to handle it when something didn't come easily.

I explained that it was okay to struggle—and in fact, it was a normal part of life. I shared stories of times I've had to work to get better. In my first job, I

told him, I messed up a few customers' orders, so the manager had to review the steps with me for a week.

I encouraged Blake to see his trumpet playing as a work in progress. He brainstormed ways he could improve a little at a time.

Then, he taped a note to his music stand that says, "Aim for progress, not perfection." He has been practicing extra each day, working on the parts that give him trouble—and on his perseverance. 👍



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Short Stops

Thinking of you

It's comforting for children to know their parents care about the ins and outs of their daily lives. Try leaving a short, unexpected note where your middle grader will find it. Or send an email or text to show interest. ("Good luck on your math test tomorrow" or "Have a great Tuesday!")

Too good to be true?

Advertisements often promise more than companies can deliver. Ask your tween to read the fine print carefully. What does she find out? She'll sharpen her critical thinking and reading comprehension skills as she evaluates the promises and the exceptions. Plus, she'll learn consumer smarts!

Homegrown cooperation

When you need to do a big job around the house like reorganizing the attic or scrubbing the baseboards, have everyone pitch in. It will teach your child to cooperate and help him see the benefits of working together, such as getting more done in less time. *Idea:* Plan a fun activity to celebrate your accomplishment.

Worth quoting

"It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters." *Epictetus*

Just for fun

Q: Why did the cow cross the road?

A: Because the chicken was on vacation!



My actions, my responsibility

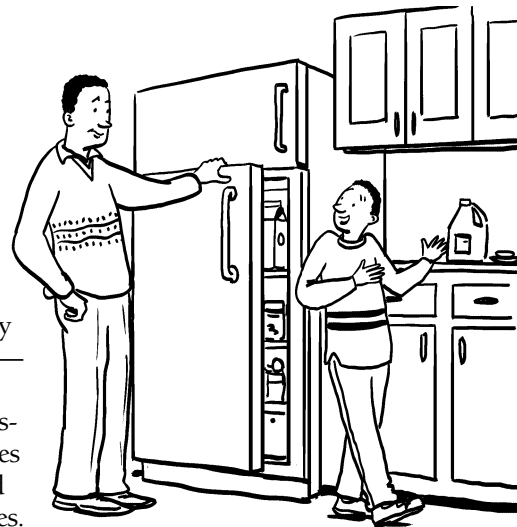
For your tween to take personal responsibility, it's important that he own up to his actions and keep his commitments. Help him learn this valuable lesson with these tips for handling common excuses.

Admit mistakes

It's typical for kids this age to immediately deny wrongdoing. ("Who left the refrigerator open?" "Not me!") They do so to keep from getting into trouble—and to protect their pride. Your middle grader will be more willing to admit mistakes if you don't overreact when he does confess. Instead, use a neutral tone, and give a gentle reminder for minor offenses. ("Let's all try to keep the door closed.")

Avoid excuses

Does your tween have an excuse for everything? Maybe he didn't get a permission slip signed and says, "You weren't home when I had it out." Make it clear it's his responsibility to find a way to get things done. Discuss what he could have done, such as leaving the paper on the kitchen counter with a note or putting a reminder in his planner to get it signed.



Accept blame

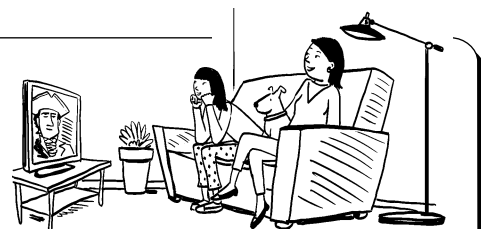
If your child is in the hot seat, he may be tempted to blame others. Maybe he didn't do well on a test, and he says his friend kept goofing off during study time. Explain that blaming others doesn't solve the problem—and that preparing for the test was up to him, not anyone else. Brainstorm what he can do next time (study alone, use a checklist to stay on track). 👍

That's history

History class involves a lot of names, places, dates, and events. Share these ideas to help your child understand—and remember—the information she is learning.

■ **Compare and contrast.** To quickly tell the differences between two documents, events, or historical figures, she could draw a line down a sheet of paper. She might describe the Declaration of Independence on one side and the Constitution on the other.

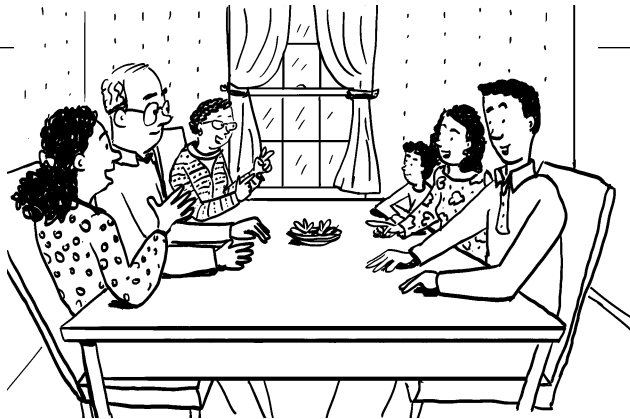
■ **Watch documentaries.** Encourage your middle grader to look for films related to topics she's studying, like the Gold Rush or the abolitionist movement. They will provide background that helps her understand the events better. *Tip:* Watch the documentaries together—you'll both learn, and they'll give you something to talk about. 👍



Great discussions

Family gatherings are a fun time to practice the art of conversation—a skill your middle grader needs for classroom discussions, after-school activities, or just hanging with friends. Here are two activities to try.

Talk in a “fishbowl.” This strategy can teach your child what does and doesn’t work in discussions. Pick something to address, such as a news article or an idea for a new business. Divide into two groups, and let one group talk while the other watches.



The observers could jot down what’s helping the conversation (clarifying what someone else said) or hurting it (muttering under your breath). Then, switch roles.

Take a side. Help your tween learn to give her opinions constructively. Choose a hot topic. (“Athletes should make less money.”) Those who agree should sit on one side of a table, and those who disagree on the other. Debate with the person sitting opposite you for a few minutes. Next, the people on one side move down one chair. Start again. Repeat until all pairs have debated. 👍

Create recycled art

Turning old objects into artwork will stretch your child’s creativity and give him practice seeing things in new ways. Suggest that he use these everyday items for do-it-yourself projects.



CDs and DVDs

Let your tween make a “reflective mosaic” by cutting old CDs and DVDs into pieces of varying shapes and sizes. (*Note:* He should use regular scissors, wear goggles, and watch for sharp edges when handling the pieces.) He could arrange and glue the pieces to cardboard or a canvas for hanging. Or he might make gifts by decorating small boxes or picture frames with the mirrored pieces.



Magazines

Have your middle schooler cut out text and pictures in black, white, and shades of gray. Now he can combine them into his own design. He’ll learn about *value*—the lightness or darkness of a color—as he decides where to place the different pieces. Or he could cut out one photo from a magazine, glue it to a blank page, and draw a background or scene around it to create a whole new piece. 👍

Parent to Parent

Put conferences on the calendar

When my daughter Marissa started middle school, I didn’t attend her parent-teacher conference because, as far as I knew, she wasn’t having any trouble. But as the year went on, I felt a little in the dark about her classes, and it was hard for me to recognize her teachers at school events.



So last year, I decided to go. Before the conference, I asked Marissa what she wanted me to discuss. She mentioned a science event where she could volunteer for extra credit, so I got more information from her teacher. Also, hearing about her work made it easier for me to discuss it with her—and I enjoyed seeing the classrooms where Marissa spends her days.

I’ve already signed up for a time slot this year, and I’m looking forward to attending! 👍

Q & A

Risky business

Q Now that my son is in middle school, I’m worried he may be introduced to drugs or alcohol. How can I convince him to stay away from them?

A Tell your child why he isn’t allowed to try drugs or alcohol. Not only is using them illegal at his age, but they are especially harmful to growing tweens.

Because the adolescent brain is still developing, it’s easier for addictions to take hold. And with repeated use, these substances can

cause permanent damage to his brain, affecting his memory and attention span.

Teens naturally want to take risks, so encourage your son to choose only healthy ones. He might push himself to do something outside his comfort zone, such as entering a writing contest or trying out for a new sport. Also, getting involved in after-school activities will give him a rewarding way to spend his time. 👍



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