

Middle School Parents[®]

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Merrimack School District
Title 1 Program

still make the difference!



Regular family meals boost well-being & school success

Families are busy. Many wonder if gathering for a meal together is really worth the effort. When it comes to middle schoolers' overall well-being, however, the answer is a clear yes.

Research shows that regular family dinners can positively contribute to middle schoolers' wellness and academic performance. In fact, studies reveal that children who share four or more family dinners a week are less likely to experiment with cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana—and they tend to achieve more in school.

To make family meals work for you:

- **Don't beat yourself up** if you can't eat every meal together. Try to have meals together a few times each week.
- **Include your child** in mealtime conversations. Ask a few specific

questions. Instead of the standard "How was your day?" ask for specifics. "What's one interesting thing that happened at school?" Then, try to keep the conversation going.

- **Keep it pleasant.** Don't use mealtime as an opportunity to argue or interrogate your child.
- **Laugh.** Humor makes mealtime fun for everyone.
- **Be flexible.** If evening meals are hard to schedule, share breakfast together. You'll have the same chance to connect.
- **Go low-tech.** Don't try to compete with digital devices for your middle schooler's attention. You'll lose. Turn off the TV and keep phones and tablets away from the table.

Source: "Benefits of Family Dinners," The Family Dinner Project.

Help your child rebound from low grades



It's natural to be upset if your child brings home a low grade. But showing your frustration and anger

won't result in better performance. A more effective approach is to:

- **Put grades into perspective.** Low grades can drain students' confidence. Make sure your middle schooler knows that grades are *not* a measure of a student's worth.
- **Focus on the positive.** Talk about what your child has done well—in an academic subject or an extracurricular activity. Ask, "What are you most proud of?"
- **Look behind the grade.** Low grades indicate a problem. What does your child think the problem is? Sometimes it's not academic ability, but poor study habits or test anxiety.
- **Set realistic goals** for improvement. Don't expect all A's if your child is currently getting all C's.
- **Contact teachers.** Sometimes, students try their best and still fail. Or, they blame teachers for their troubles. Gather more information by asking teachers for their opinion about what's happening.

Make the most of parent-teacher conferences in middle school



If you have questions or concerns about your middle schooler's progress in school, don't hesitate to request a

parent-teacher conference. Then:

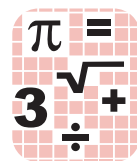
- **Make a list** of things you'd like to discuss ahead of time. Include questions and information about your child that you'd like the teacher to know.
- **Be prompt.** Teachers often schedule conferences back-to-back. Arriving late may reduce the time you have together.
- **Keep an open mind.** Your goal is to work as a team with your child's teachers. Even if a teacher says something you disagree with, listen carefully before stating your view.

- **Clarify and summarize** as you go. If you don't understand something the teacher says, just ask.
- **Ask the teacher** how you can support your child. If your student is doing well, ask what you can do to keep things on a positive track. If there are problems, ask what you can do to help.
- **Take notes.** This will help you remember what you discussed.

"Unity is strength ... when there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved."

—Mattie Stepanek

Help your child study effectively for math and science classes



Studying for math and science often requires different skills than studying for other subjects. These subjects

are like building blocks. To do well, your child needs to understand the basic ideas really well.

To study math and science effectively, encourage your child to:

- **Schedule extra time**, especially if the topics are challenging. Your child should block out time to work on these subjects every day.
- **Begin each study session** by reviewing what the teacher covered in class. Then, your child can move on to new material.
- **Check understanding.** Your child should look for sample questions in the reading and answer them. If your child can't answer all of them, suggest rereading the text.
- **Draw a picture.** Making a diagram of something can help students see how things fit together.
- **Answer all of the questions.** Some teachers may assign only select problems on a worksheet. However, solving *all* the problems will give your child more practice.
- **Use different resources.** Sometimes a textbook explanation just doesn't click. Encourage your child to look for other ways to understand the topic, like watching a video online, looking at a different book, or asking an older sibling for help.
- **Teach it to someone else.** If your child can explain a concept to you or even a pet, it shows they truly understand it.

Are you stressing the value of your child's effort?



Every student is capable of their own "personal best." Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out if you are

encouraging your child's best effort:

___1. **Do you point out effort?** "I'm impressed that you added additional examples to your paper. It's much clearer now."

___2. **Do you encourage** your child to take pride in having a strong work ethic? "It must feel great to know that you worked so hard on your project."

___3. **Do you point** to effort as the reason for your child's successes? "That extra 30 minutes of studying each night has really paid off."

___4. **Do you celebrate progress** and not just final results when you see your child is trying hard?

___5. **Do you model** consistent and diligent effort? "I am working on my report for work each day this week so I can get it completed by Friday."

How well are you doing?

If most of your answers are *yes*, you are encouraging your child to put effort into doing well. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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Practical Ideas for Parents
to Help Their Children.

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Remind your child that there is no such thing as online privacy



Social media platforms are increasingly popular among middle school students, who use them to share their thoughts, photos and videos. While these platforms offer ways for children to connect and express themselves, experts caution families about potential downsides.

Adolescents are prone to risk-taking and often have low impulse control. This makes it crucial for you to be aware of what your middle schooler is seeing and posting online. To help your child make smart choices on social media:

- **Discuss** how nothing posted online can ever be completely removed. Once your child posts something,

readers or viewers can easily take a screenshot or download the content. That content can then be re-shared countless times.

- **Find out who can view** your child's social media. Make sure accounts are private and only visible to people your child actually knows and trusts.
- **Apply values to online behavior.** If your child wouldn't do or say something in real life, it's not OK to do or say it online.
- **Stress safety above all.** Students should never post information that would allow someone to locate them in real life, or arrange to meet anyone they met online without you present.

Source: V.L. Dunkley, M.D., "Why Social Media is Not Smart for Middle School Kids," *Psychology Today*.

Organization is the key to staying on top of schoolwork



Middle schoolers may have assignments in six or more classes, after-school activities and busy social lives.

That's why organization isn't just helpful—it's essential for achieving academic success.

To help your child get organized:

- **Have a weekly planning meeting.** Dedicate five minutes each Sunday to sitting down with your child and mapping out the upcoming week. This simple routine can ensure smoother days and fewer forgotten tasks. Discuss assignments, appointments and social plans together.
- **Make sure your child is using a planner** to keep track of schoolwork and activities. Encourage your student to check it before leaving school to see which materials to bring home.
- **Have your child make a daily checklist** of tasks when starting schoolwork at home. Suggest making checklists for long-range projects that outline the steps and their deadlines.
- **Choose places to keep** specific belongings—especially things that get misplaced frequently. School notebooks and other items to bring back to school might be kept in a box by the front door.
- **Expect your child to put things** away in their designated spots. Set an example by doing this with other household items.
- **Declutter regularly.** Set aside time once a week for a quick study space and backpack clear-out. This prevents clutter from accumulating and makes it easier for your child to find important papers and supplies.

Q: My middle schooler does not enjoy writing at all. When given a writing assignment, my child just stares at the blank page. Is there anything I can do to help?

Questions & Answers

A: Middle schoolers are often reluctant writers. Many simply freeze with fear at the thought of writing. They worry that what they write won't be any good, or that they'll be made fun of.

To help your middle schooler overcome writer's block:

- **Explain** that professional writers have difficulty writing sometimes, too.
- **Talk through ideas** together. Encourage your child to brainstorm and make a list of as many ideas as possible.
- **Suggest writing down** ideas just as they come. Later, your child can edit for flow, grammar and spelling.
- **Encourage** using a computer to write if possible. This makes it easier to make revisions.
- **Suggest free writing.** Your child should write anything that comes to mind, no matter how silly. Or, ask your child to write about something enjoyable.
- **Offer constructive feedback.** If your child asks you to review writing, note what you like first. Focus on what your child is trying to say. Suggest ways your student could strengthen it.
- **Don't fix mistakes** for your child. This won't boost self-confidence. Instead, it will send the message that you don't think your child is capable of fixing them independently.
- **Be patient.** Allow your child to express frustration. It takes time to become a strong writer.

It Matters: Reading

Find the value in different types of reading material



You might not see your middle schooler buried in a novel on a regular basis, but that doesn't mean your child isn't

reading. Many middle schoolers don't read a lot of traditional books, and that's OK.

Nearly every type of reading has value—from graphic novels to articles and online forums. When you see your child reading, no matter what it is, encourage it!

When middle schoolers read:

- **Articles**, they learn the value of reading for pleasure and interest. As long as the material is age-appropriate, this is a constructive activity your child. Share articles you think your middle schooler may enjoy.
- **Sports scores**, they learn to read for information—and that news outlets are valuable resources. Ask your child questions that require a bit of research.
- **Nonfiction books**, they build fluency, comprehension and vocabulary skills. Consider giving your child a biography of a person you both admire.
- **Instruction manuals** or how-to books, they learn that reading can teach practical skills. Help your child look for how-to books on topics of interest.
- **Text messages**, they learn to use reading and writing to communicate. But if texts are the *only* things your child reads—it's time to introduce a bit more variety!

Source: D. Booth, *Reading Doesn't Matter Anymore ... Shattering the Myths of Literacy*, Stenhouse Publishers.

Your middle schooler can still benefit from read-aloud time

Middle schoolers are too old to be read to, right? Absolutely not. Most young middle schoolers are still better at *listening* than they are at *reading*.

When you read aloud to your child, you introduce new concepts, ideas and vocabulary. The key is to keep it short and to the point.

Here are some strategies to try:

- **Follow the news.** Choose a news article to read aloud to your child at breakfast. Have your child do the same for you after dinner.
- **Share what you are reading.** Read a funny or surprising piece aloud. Watch for signs of interest in your child. If they appear, read a little longer.
- **Select a book to read together.** Choose a genre that neither of



you is familiar with. Consider science fiction, historical fiction or a biography and read for a few minutes each evening.

Three ways to boost your child's reading comprehension



In middle school, academic success will depend on your child's reading comprehension. Your child will

be expected to understand the meaning of a passage, based on what is implied as well as directly stated.

To build reading comprehension, encourage your child to:

1. **Make connections.** When children read something that reminds them of something they have seen or done, the reading material has more meaning and it will make them think. Help your child look for books or articles that are linked

to some favorite things, places or memories.

2. **Read often.** The more your middle schooler reads, the easier it will become. And the easier reading becomes, the more energy and interest your child will have left over to focus on the meaning.
3. **Think about the reading.** Encourage your child to write a summary after reading that answers questions, such as: *Who is the main character? What kind of personality does he have? How can you tell? Does he remind you of anyone you know? How do you think the book will end?*