

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

Title I-Educational Service Unit 10

MIDDLE SCHOOL



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Spending time learning in nature supports success in school

When it comes to helping your middle schooler learn, the whole world is your classroom. And research shows that heading outdoors together for learning activities is an effective way to boost your child's motivation, school performance and general well-being.

Try these activities to help your child benefit from time in nature—and have fun at the same time:

- **Have a photo scavenger hunt.** Make a list of natural sights for your child to photograph, such as a cumulus cloud, a spider web, a reflection in water and a tree's shadow.
- **Make a map.** On a visit to a nature area, challenge your child to map it and include features like trails, streams, water crossings, fallen logs, etc.
- **Identify what you see.** Help your child use a field guide or an app like *Seek* to identify plants and animals. At night, identify planets, stars and constellations using a star chart or an app such as *Star Walk 2*.
- **Write poetry.** Have your child make a list of the sights, sounds and scents outdoors and use it to write a poem.
- **Put the sun to work.** Encourage your child to research how to make a sundial with sidewalk chalk. Or, look up how to turn a pizza box into a solar oven.



Source: J. Mann and others, "Getting Out of the Classroom and Into Nature: A Systematic Review of Nature-Specific Outdoor Learning on School Children's Learning and Development," *Frontiers in Public Health*.



Talk about student responsibilities

Not all middle schoolers know what being a responsible student looks like day to day. To help your child understand, discuss essential aspects of responsibility and suggest ways to put them into practice. Responsible students:

- **Fulfill duties.** They do what is necessary—even when they don't feel like it. For your child, that might mean getting ready for school on time, reading every day and turning in complete assignments when they are due.
- **Are self-reliant.** Most middle schoolers are too young to be totally self-reliant, but they can do many tasks for themselves. Your child could pack a lunch and keep track of gym shoes and other items needed for school.
- **Persist,** and stick to their goals. After a poor performance, your child can work on sharpening skills and try again.

Source: M.S. Josephson and others, *Parenting to Build Character in your Teen*, Boys Town Press.

Promote active thinking

Students get more out of schoolwork when they actively think about the material. Encourage your child to:

- **Think about** the differences between central ideas and details.
- **Consider six questions.** Figuring out *who, what, when, where, why* and *how* improves comprehension of many texts.
- **Summarize.** Putting material into their own words helps students remember it.



Encourage reading ahead

Arriving in classes on time is important for doing well, but your child should also arrive ready to learn.

One way students can do this is by reading ahead. Skimming over the next day's lesson or chapter in advance will help your child be familiar with the topic.

That can also help your student ask better questions and participate more in class.



Offer tips for clear writing

Your child may be more willing to accept suggestions for improving writing *before* starting work on a writing assignment than afterward. Encourage your child to focus on:

- **Staying on topic.** The fact that an idea is interesting doesn't make it relevant.
- **Organization.** Points should flow logically and be supported by details.
- **Word choice.** Words should add meaning, and not just take up space. Your child should also avoid repeating patterns of words from sentence to sentence.
- **Mechanics.** Remind your child to proofread work for correct spelling, grammar and punctuation.



How do I help my child reject negative peer pressure?

Q: My child has made friends with some classmates who think it's funny to be rude and make mean jokes about people. I'm afraid my child will feel pressure to behave this way, too. What should I do?



A: Start a conversation about friends with your child. Without mentioning any names, ask your child some general questions. For example, how does being with school friends make your child feel? What do they like to do? What values do they share? These friends may make your child feel funny and popular. Or, your child may be uncomfortable with their behavior, but not really know what to do about it.

To guide your middle schooler through this tricky area:

- **Steer clear of directly criticizing** your child's friends. It is likely to make your child feel the need to defend them.
- **Ask your child to consider behaviors.** "It sounds like Jamie's comment to the teacher was pretty rude. How did it make you feel?"
- **Discuss inappropriate humor.** Explain that no matter how many kids laugh, if a comment is rude or hurtful, it isn't funny—and it isn't OK.
- **Set boundaries.** If you have real misgivings about certain friends, supervise the time your child spends with them outside of school.



Are you helping your child improve relationships with teachers?

Most students will encounter a tough teacher they don't like at one time or another in their school careers. Are you ready to help your child rise to this challenge? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

- ___ **1. Will you tell** your child that learning to work with all kinds of people is necessary in life?
- ___ **2. Will you review** your child's goals for the class together?
- ___ **3. Will you help** your child brainstorm things to do to improve the situation, such as asking the teacher about strategies for learning the material?
- ___ **4. Will you express** your confidence in your child's ability to work with the teacher and learn successfully?

- ___ **5. Will you encourage** your child to talk with the counselor if problems persist?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you will help your child address issues constructively. For each no, try that idea.

"What seem to us as bitter trials are often blessings in disguise."

—Oscar Wilde

Instill smart study habits

The way your child approaches schoolwork has a big impact on learning. To help your middle schooler develop effective habits:

- **Discuss project management.** Help your child think of all the steps involved in a project and schedule time to do each.
- **Sharpen awareness of time.** Have your child estimate how long an assignment will take, then use a timer to check.
- **Schedule a regular time** to do schoolwork when your child is most alert. Help your child develop a routine for beginning study time.
- **Show how to use a planner,** app or calendar to track assignments and test dates. Review it together once a week.

Build a base of knowledge

Students understand the meaning of what they read more easily when they have *prior knowledge* of the topic or concepts in the text. To add to your child's base of background knowledge:



- **Learn** about the world together. Visit historic sites, watch educational shows, etc.
- **Share** news articles with your middle schooler on a wide variety of topics.
- **Talk about things** you have done and seen in your own life.

Connect at a conference

Parent-teacher conferences can be helpful in middle school, and you can ask for one anytime. To make the most of these meetings:

- **Get your child's input** about concerns and questions before your conference.
- **Bring a written list** of topics you want to cover so you won't forget them.
- **Ask the teacher** for specific examples of issues and how to address them.

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