

# Helping Students Learn<sup>®</sup>

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



January 2020

Onalaska Elementary School

## Teach your child to concentrate on six elements of writing

Students who learn to express their thoughts effectively in writing are more likely to succeed in school—and in the workplace later on. But middle schoolers are often sensitive to criticism of their work and resistant to suggestions for improvement.

So how can you help your child become a better writer? Try offering guidance *before* she begins a writing assignment. Encourage her to focus on these six areas:

- 1. Ideas and content.** Your child's writing should make a point and stick to the topic.
- 2. Organization.** Her writing should have a clear beginning, middle and end. Details should support the main idea.
- 3. Sentence structure.** The sentences should have a natural flow. Your child should avoid repeating word patterns. For example, one or two sentence may begin with "This is" but the others should all begin differently.
- 4. Word choice.** When your child describes something, the reader should be able to visualize it. Words should add meaning—your child should avoid using extra words just to take up space.
- 5. Voice.** Your child should put her thoughts into her own words. Her personality and tone should shine through.
- 6. Mechanics.** Correct spelling, grammar and punctuation make writing clear. Remind your child to proofread her work carefully.



## Peer pressure isn't always a problem

Kids pay a lot of attention to the appearance, words and actions of their peers—and often change their own behavior accordingly. How you respond should depend on the type of influence. Peer pressure can be:

- **Positive.** Your child's friends want good grades. They read interesting books. They enjoy hanging out at one another's homes. Your response: Welcome his friends to your home. Praise the efforts your child and his friends make.
- **Neutral.** Your child wears his hair in a messy style because his friends do. Your response: Do nothing. This is common middle school behavior, and it's innocent and harmless.
- **Negative.** Your child gets caught smoking or shoplifting with peers. Your response: Steer him to positive activities and monitor him closely. Supervise visits with friends who spell trouble. Encourage him to spend time with ethical friends. Allow more freedom when he re-earns your trust.

## Refresh smart habits with New Year's resolutions

Have your child's work habits gotten off track? Treat the new year as a fresh start. Suggest that he resolve to:



- 1. Commit** to a homework routine. Have him choose a daily study time and stick to it.
- 2. "Single task."** Multitasking doesn't work. Urge your child to focus on one thing at a time.
- 3. Strive for a new goal.** Would he like to raise his English grade? What will it take to reach that goal? Figuring out the steps makes goals easier to achieve.

## Just what is responsibility?

To encourage responsible behavior, make sure your child understands what it involves. Responsible people:

- **Do** what they are supposed to—even when they don't feel like it.
- **Do** as much as they can for themselves.
- **Don't** give up when things get tough.

## A self-affirmation activity can be motivating

Studies show that writing about a personal value (such as honesty) can boost achievement in school. Groups of middle schoolers were asked to write several times about how their values affected the ways they acted and felt. The students improved their grades, and the next year, they signed up for more challenging classes.



To try something similar at home, help your child brainstorm a list of values she cares about. Give her a journal and suggest she write about them from time to time.

Source: M. Martinovich, "Self-affirmation plays role in minority students' college success," Phys.org, niswc.com/affirm.



## Stress is getting in my child's way. What can I do?

**Q:** Stress seems to be a problem for my sixth grader. Everything from homework to the weather upsets him. How can I help him manage his stress so he can learn?

**A:** The move from elementary school to middle school is a big change. It's normal for kids to feel out of sorts from time to time. But if the stress—rather than whatever sets it off—is affecting your child's learning and well being, it's time to act.



To teach your child to manage everyday stress, help him:

- **See it coming.** Does your child start grinding his teeth or biting his nails when he begins to feel anxious? That's when he needs to take action. Stress is more manageable when it's caught early.
- **Plan ways to respond.** If a big task seems overwhelming, for example, he can break it down into smaller parts.
- **Release the tension.** Taking a break to exercise, read or shoot hoops with a friend may be all your child needs to calm down.
- **Develop healthy habits.** A nutritious diet and adequate sleep can help ease anxiety.

Let your child know he's not alone, and you will help him overcome his stress. Consult his doctor or school counselor if the issue continues.



## Are you encouraging future thinking?

Adulthood may seem like a distant dream to your middle schooler. But considering her future now will help her make that dream a positive reality. Are you helping your child think ahead? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

- \_\_\_ **1. Do you encourage** your child to take courses that will challenge her?
- \_\_\_ **2. Do you ask** your child about types of careers she might like to pursue as an adult?
- \_\_\_ **3. Do you talk** about higher education options (college, technical school, etc.) with your child?
- \_\_\_ **4. Do you tell** your child that you expect her to gain the maximum education possible?
- \_\_\_ **5. Do you help** your child develop study habits that will

help her master more complex work in years to come?

### How well are you doing?

*More yes answers mean you are helping your child focus on the future. For each no, try that idea.*

*"The best we can do with the future is prepare and savor the possibilities of what can be done in the present."*

—Todd Kashdan

## Try out some digital tools

Today's students love technology. And it can be an effective way to excite their interest in learning. Your child can use tech tools to:

- **Learn homework skills.** When he wants to know how to solve quadratic equations or cite sources, he can search on YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) for a video on the topic.
- **Study for a test.** He can use an app or website like [quizlet.com](http://quizlet.com) or [kahoot.com](http://kahoot.com) to create custom quizzes and games to help him recall information.
- **Work on a project.** He can find tools to create presentations and posters on [prezi.com](http://prezi.com) and [glogster.com](http://glogster.com).

## Address protests calmly

You've established rules and consequences, but now your child is ranting about them. To handle an angry outburst:

- **Give your child** some space and time to settle down. Resume your discussion when you're both in control of emotions.
- **Don't give in** if your decisions are reasonable. Show your child that pleading and tantrums won't change your mind.

## Support your child's success

Children who feel loved and supported at home are happier and more likely to do well in school. Surveys show that students want parents to:



- **Be good role models.**
- **Offer guidance.**
- **Treat them** with respect.
- **Notice when they** do things right.
- **Avoid lecturing** about mistakes.
- **Encourage them** to do their best in school and elsewhere.

Source: A. Jackson and others, *Making the Most of Middle School: A Field Guide for Parents and Teachers*, Teachers College Press.

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