

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



October 2020

Onalaska Elementary School

Connect progress and strategies to foster a growth mindset

What your child thinks about her own ability to learn matters. Students who believe that their intelligence can grow over time—a growth mindset—tend to do better than those who believe that they are as smart as they will ever be.

You might think that praising your middle schooler for trying hard can help her believe in her ability to get smarter. But research on adolescents shows that praising effort alone can backfire. Students this age often admire others who seem to succeed without trying. So when they get praised only for their effort, they can feel insulted.

To help your child develop a growth mindset:

- **Ask her to reflect on her learning.** If she has made progress in a tough subject, help her see how far she has come.
- **Focus on strategies.** Help her think about the specific things she did that led to her progress. Encourage her to try successful strategies again. When a strategy doesn't work, help her think of another she can try.
- **Reinforce the value of mistakes.** When your child is disappointed in a grade or a result, encourage her to think about what went wrong—and what she can learn from it to use next time.

Source: J. Amemiya, M. Wang, "Why Effort Praise Can Backfire in Adolescence," *Child Development Perspectives*, Society for Research in Child Development, nswc.com/mindset-motivation.



Talking with teachers helps you help your child

Just like you, your child's teachers want her to succeed in school. By scheduling a discussion session with a teacher (in person or online), you can ask questions and get suggestions for solving issues. To set the tone for productive teamwork, begin on a positive note. "My child really liked it when you... ." Share information and discuss ways you can both support your student.

Encourage active reading

It's easy for a middle schooler's mind to wander if he is just staring at words on a page. Encourage your child to put some action into reading. Suggest that he:

- **Take notes.** Thinking about which points are the most important and writing them down can improve his reading comprehension.
- **Create a word bank.** When he comes across an unfamiliar word, have your child look it up and write down the definition.



Source: "Middle School Reading: Improving your Seventh and Eighth Grader's Reading Comprehension," Math & Reading Help, nswc.com/active-read.



Ease your child's fears before a test

Just the thought of a test can make some students so nervous that they come unglued and can't do their best. Luckily, there's an effective treatment for a case of test anxiety: preparation. When your child has an upcoming test:

- **Encourage him to ask** the teacher questions. What is the purpose of this test? What material will it cover? How much will the score count toward your child's grade? What will the question format be?
- **Suggest he also ask** about ways to study. Are there practice tests he can take? Websites or apps he should use?
- **Help him schedule** multiple short study sessions in the days leading up to the test.
- **Make sure he sticks** to a regular sleep schedule. Late-night cramming doesn't work.
- **Offer perspective** on test day. Remind your child of the prep work he has done, and that you care more that he learns the material than you do about his grade.

Ask 'thinking' questions

Your middle schooler is learning to think critically, give reasons for her answers and supply evidence to back them up. Help her practice by asking her thought-provoking questions, like:

- **Why are your favorites** your favorites? Ask her to tell you some specific things she likes about a singer or book character.
- **How can our family** save money on a household expense? Also ask what she thinks you should do with the savings—and why.





My child is not a morning person. How can I help?

Q: My son always seems to be tired in the morning. His schoolwork is suffering, and so is his attitude. I don't think he is getting enough sleep, even though his bedtime hasn't changed. What else can I do?

A: Too little sleep can certainly make a middle schooler cranky and inattentive. It doesn't take much—a few lost minutes here and there add up. To make sure your child is getting the sleep he needs:

- **Rethink bedtime.** Middle schoolers need between eight and 10 hours of sleep each night. Count backward from your child's wake-up time, and make bedtime 20 minutes earlier than the time he needs to be fast asleep.
- **Turn screens off** an hour before bedtime. The light they emit can interfere with sleep. Instead, help your child unwind by reading or playing a board game together.
- **Limit naps.** Too much sleep during the day makes it harder to fall asleep at night. Keep afternoon snoozes to under one hour.
- **Stop by for a bedtime chat.** If worries are keeping your child awake at night, talking about them with you may relieve his mind. You can also remind him of something good he did that day so he goes to sleep feeling positive about himself.



Do you know how your child is doing?

Staying current on how the school year is going for your child will help you address small issues before they become big problems. Have you talked with her about the year so far? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below:

- ___ **1. Are you aware** if your middle schooler is keeping up with her classes?
- ___ **2. Do you discuss** the way she feels about her progress in each subject?
- ___ **3. Have you made sure** that you both understand the teachers' expectations?
- ___ **4. Do you talk** with your child about ways to balance schoolwork and the rest of her life?
- ___ **5. Do you ask** how your child would handle pressure to do things she knows are wrong?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are supporting your child's school success. For each no, try that idea.

"When children and parents talk regularly about school, children perform better academically."

—National Education Association

School counselors provide many kinds of help

Middle school counselors have specialized training that lets them support students through the unique challenges of these years. Your child's counselor can help him:

- **Find needed help.** The counselor can assist with locating outside resources for services from tutoring to therapy.
- **Resolve conflicts,** both academic and social.
- **Establish goals** and identify classes, strategies and activities that will help him reach them.

Source: "The Essential Role of Middle School Counselors," American School Counselor Association, niscw.com/msc.

Play word power games

Sometimes, building vocabulary *can* be fun and games! Try these games with your child:

- **Pick a topic,** such as *travel*. See who can come up with more fancy words related to it (*itinerary, amenities, secluded*).
- **Name a word,** and take turns giving synonyms (words with similar meanings). For example, two synonyms for *house* are *abode* and *dwelling*.



Self-respecting students improve learning for all

A strong sense of self-respect can motivate your child academically. It can also help him understand the value of showing others the same respect. Teach your child that self-respecting students:

- 1. Understand that learning** is an important way to better themselves.
- 2. Act in ways** that make them feel proud of themselves.
- 3. Live up to responsibilities** and are accountable for their actions.

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