

# Middle School Parents<sup>®</sup>

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Saint Helen Catholic School

*still make the difference!*



## Exercise can decrease stress and boost academic success

**S**tress has a negative effect on student achievement. That means that no matter how much students have studied or prepared, if they show up to classes stressed-out, they can't give learning their best effort.

One effective way to help your child decrease stress is to promote daily physical activity. Here's why. Exercise:

- **Helps students feel happier.** The endorphins exercise releases also increase energy levels. A case of writer's block? Shooting some hoops might help your child return to the task focused and energized.
- **Is calming.** When people are focused on the exercise or sport at hand, they are likely to stop focusing on their worries.

- **Increases self-confidence.** When children feel like they have more control over their bodies, it can make them feel more in control of their studies as well.
- **Improves memory.** Studies have shown that the increased blood flow to the brain caused by exercise can help students remember more. If your middle schooler doesn't have time to exercise, talk about simple ways to fit some activity into the day. You could even plan to work out together—you could probably use the reduction in stress as much as your child!

**Source:** "Exercise and stress: Get moving to manage stress," Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research.

## Help your child build a strong vocabulary



Building a strong vocabulary helps students understand what they read and express themselves

more effectively. To help your child strengthen vocabulary:

1. **Read every day.** This is the single best way for anyone to improve vocabulary. If your child likes a book by a certain author, find more books by that author. If your child has a special interest, such as airplanes, suggest a biography of a famous aviator. Every so often, encourage your child to read something that seems a bit challenging.
2. **Look it up.** A dictionary is a valuable tool for students. Have your child look up new words to learn their definitions.
3. **Practice.** Learning the meaning of a new word is a great start. But that new word will soon be lost if your child doesn't use it repeatedly. Encourage your child to use new words in conversation.
4. **Speak to adults.** When children have conversations with adults, they are often exposed to new words. Don't do the talking for your child around adults.

# Recognize emotional milestones your middle schooler will face



Middle schoolers are still reaching milestones. And staying aware of them will help you support your child.

Along with the physical changes of puberty, middle schoolers are dealing with:

- **A need for independence.** The preteen years are prime time for this particular phase. Middle schoolers begin to separate a bit from parents as they begin figuring out who they are. They may be less likely to admit it right now, but they still need adults' attention, love and support.
- **A desire to feel respected.** Middle schoolers may bristle at being "treated like little kids." Honor your child's need to feel more grown up. Give meaningful responsibilities

and allow your child to make some decisions independently, such as when to do assignments. Middle schoolers also have a greater need for privacy. Respect this by knocking before entering your child's room.

- **Waves of self-doubt.** Along with more maturity, the preteen years can bring a great deal of insecurity. Help your middle schooler weather episodes of self-doubt by praising progress and successes, and supporting emotional needs.

**"We worry about what a child will be tomorrow, yet we forget that he is someone today."**

—Stacia Tauscher

# This five-step process can help your child solve problems



"I don't have enough time to finish my project."  
"I don't think my teacher likes me." These are typical problems middle schoolers must solve.

While it may be tempting to try and solve problems for your child, it's far better to help your child sharpen problem-solving skills and find solutions independently.

Share this five-step method:

1. **Define the problem.** Before a problem can be solved, your child needs to be specific about what it is.
2. **Brainstorm solutions.** Once the problem is defined, have your child list possible solutions. During this step, don't let your child get bogged down in analyzing each idea. Your
3. **Evaluate the options.** Now that there are several potential solutions, your child needs to weigh the pros and cons of each. Which solution seems especially strong?
4. **Make a plan of action.** Your child should choose the "best" solution and devise a plan to carry it out. Let your child follow the plan independently, but offer support and guidance when necessary.
5. **Reassess the situation.** How is the plan working? Is it helping your child solve the problem or reach the goal? If yes, wonderful! If not, suggest that your child go back to the "evaluating" step and try another solution.

child should simply list every possible solution.

# Are you showing your child how to be thorough?



So many poor grades result not from a lack of knowledge, but rather from careless mistakes.

Are you teaching your middle schooler to do careful, accurate work? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:   
\_\_\_ 1. **Do you review** your child's planner or assignment notebook to find out what assignments there are?   
\_\_\_ 2. **Do you encourage** your child to pay attention to details—such as putting name and the correct date on papers?   
\_\_\_ 3. **Do you remind** your child that "neatness counts," and that sloppy, hard-to-read work will probably be marked down?   
\_\_\_ 4. **Do you encourage** your child to double-check answers before submitting work?   
\_\_\_ 5. **Do you look over** your child's finished work together to ensure it is neat and complete?

**How well are you doing?**

If most of your answers are *yes*, you are helping your child turn in thorough work. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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# Ask your child to be responsible for limiting digital device use



According to a 2021 census conducted by Common Sense Media, use of screen media by middle and high school students is up 17% since the start of the pandemic. On average, kids are spending over eight hours a day on entertainment screen media.

Experts agree that excessive recreational screen time can have a negative effect on students' learning and academic performance. In addition to monitoring how much time your child spends on screen media, encourage your child to be mindful as well.

To monitor and limit usage, encourage your child to:

- **Spend one day tracking** mobile device use and the amount of time

spent on it. Your child can even use an app to track time.

- **Reduce that time the next day.** Together, brainstorm ways to accomplish this. Your child could turn off notifications and check digital devices only during specific times.
- **Establish technology-free times.** These are times when mobile devices should be turned off or out of reach, such as when your child does schoolwork, eats family meals and goes to bed.

As middle schoolers learn to take more responsibility for their time, they may be surprised at how much more they can accomplish in a day!

*Source: The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021, Common Sense Media Inc.*

**Q:** The first half of the school year didn't go so well for my seventh grader. Grades were lower than we both would've liked. How can I make sure my child does better during the second half?

## Questions & Answers

**A:** Together, talk about how the new calendar year is a starting over point. To help your child make a fresh start, adopt—or recommit to—positive school habits. Here's how:

- **Set goals.** You can't expect your middle schooler to turn the school year around overnight. But you can help set reasonable, attainable goals. For instance, if your child earned all C's last grading period, focusing on bringing at least some of the grades up to B's.
- **Schedule study time.** Has your child been slacking off on finishing assignments? Insist on a regular work time. If your child is freshest right after school, then make that the work time. But if your child does better with a little downtime first, consider an hour break before cracking open the books.
- **Enforce bedtime.** Does your child always stay up for "just one more episode"? There's a good chance your student is not getting enough sleep. Studies show that sleepy students don't perform as well in school, so insist that your child head to bed (without digital devices) at a reasonable hour.
- **Monitor progress.** Don't wait until your child fails a quiz or brings home a note from a teacher to discover there is a problem. Instead, touch base regularly with teachers.

# Encourage your child to use a journal to plan for the future



Middle schoolers aren't expected to know what they want to do for the rest of their lives. But it is realistic for them to have some sense of what they like and what they don't, what they are good at and what they struggle with.

Experts agree that it is helpful for students to begin thinking this way once they get to sixth grade. Children who know themselves have a good head start on the future.

Keeping a journal is one effective way for middle schoolers to get to know themselves better. In the journal, your child should answer questions such as:

- *What are my strengths in school?*
- *What are my weaknesses in school?*
- *What do I love doing outside school?*

- *What am I good at outside school?*
- *What do I like to learn about or would I like to learn more about?*
- *What is important to me right now?*
- *Do I prefer to work with others or alone?*
- *Am I happier when I am indoors or outdoors?*
- *What have I done in my life that I am most proud of?*
- *What do my friends admire about me?*
- *What do I admire most in other people?*

Encourage your child to update the journal regularly. The answers are likely to change—and that's OK. Your child should pay more attention to the things that stay the same, as these trends could provide clues to future success.

# It Matters: Motivation

## Four strategies help your child regain focus



Middle schoolers sometimes fall into the “Why work hard?” trap—especially during the second half of the school year.

Encouraging middle schoolers to stay on task and think about what they are learning can help them remain focused. To support this effort at home:

- 1. Connect learning to real life.** Some students don't want to complete assignments because they can't see why they are important. Does your middle schooler love video games? Can your child imagine working with computers someday? Remind your child that solid math skills could be a ticket into that field.
- 2. Praise solid effort.** Notice when your child is working hard on an assignment and say that you are proud. Middle schoolers may act like they don't want adults' approval, but they really do. There's no motivator like a pat on the back from a family member.
- 3. Celebrate success.** Did your child earn a B on that tough history test? Prepare a special dinner. Or, have a build-your-own sundae party. Celebrating hard work could be just the boost your child needs to keep striving.
- 4. Offer a challenge.** It's too late to take a new class this year, but what does your child think about choosing tougher courses next year? The idea just might inspire your child to keep learning.

## ‘Learned helplessness’ can derail middle school success

A student who has had several failures in a row is at risk of refusing to try a new or challenging task. This fear of failure is often referred to as *learned helplessness*—in which a child's first decision is to avoid a task out of fear that it may be too difficult.

To help your child guard against learned helplessness:

- **Focus on being positive.** When students believe success is possible and decide to give a task or assignment their best effort, they are more likely to succeed.
- **Try easier work first.** Some children gain self-confidence by finishing an easy task first.
- **Try new learning strategies.** Does your child need to move around? Does making pictures



or graphs help your child understand the material better? Does comprehension improve if your child makes a recording of the reading and plays it back?

## Your words can affect your middle schooler's motivation



The way children hear family members talk about them to others can motivate them to do their best—or discourage them from even trying.

To make sure your conversations have a positive effect on your child:

- **Always assume** your child is listening. Kids instantly perk up their ears when they hear their names. And they pick up more than just words. They are mature enough to notice tone of voice and the context of the conversation.
- **Avoid making** negative comments about your middle schooler to

others—especially to other family members. Think of how you would feel if two people you love talked about how lazy you were, right in front of you.

- **Avoid discussing** your child's strengths and weaknesses with siblings. This can fuel sibling rivalry.
- **Focus on what's important.** Talk about your child's kindness or sense of responsibility. Talk about times when your child didn't give up, even when the going got tough.

**Source:** S. Rimm, *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades and What You Can Do About It: A Six-Step Program for Parents and Teachers*, Great Potential Press.