

# Middle School Parents<sup>®</sup>

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## Teach your middle schooler to make decisions in five steps

**D**ecision-making can be a tough process for middle schoolers. However, there are few skills more important in school and in life than learning to make wise decisions.

Teach your child to follow these steps:

- 1. Get the facts.** Let's say he has been asked to look after a neighbor's dog for the weekend. He should find out exactly what he will need to do. How often will he need to feed and walk the dog? At what times?
- 2. Anticipate conflicts.** Your child has to study this weekend. He's also been invited to watch a friend's soccer tournament. Can he do both and still care for the dog? If the dog needs to be let out several times during the day and the soccer tournament lasts all day, your child will have to choose between the two.
- 3. Consider the consequences** of each choice. If he skips the tournament, will his friend be upset? If he turns down the job, will the neighbor ask another person to care for the dog in the future?
- 4. Come up with alternatives.** Perhaps your child can explain to his friend that he is trying to get steady work caring for the dog. Could he come watch his friend play in a soccer game next weekend instead?
- 5. Accept that decisions** may have downsides. If your child decides to miss the tournament and care for the dog, he is giving up time with a friend. But he is gaining a chance to look after the dog when his neighbor travels. Sometimes good decisions require a small sacrifice to achieve a long-term benefit.

## Use report-card time to set goals, celebrate effort



Your middle schooler just brought home a report card. Whether it's good or bad, you can use it as a learning

opportunity. With your child:

- **Talk about it.** Are there any surprises? Discuss them with her. If you're upset about a particular grade, remember to stay calm. Yelling will just shut down communication with your child. Calmly say, "I'm disappointed about that C in English. We need to talk about it some more."
- **Set goals.** Use your child's report card to help her chart a course for the rest of the year. If she did well, talk about how she can keep up the good work. If she struggled, brainstorm ways to improve things going forward. "You did a great job of turning in your science homework, but you stumbled on tests. What if I start quizzing you each night of the week leading up to a test?"
- **Celebrate.** Straight A's are always a reason to celebrate, but if your child worked hard to bring up a grade in a class, she deserves a pat on the back. Always acknowledge your child's effort.

## Research shows that better nutrition leads to better grades



According to research, a healthy diet can help students stay alert in class and retain the information they learn there.

Unfortunately, packing nutritious foods doesn't necessarily mean your child will eat them. That's because kids routinely trade lunches with fellow students, or even toss out things they don't feel like eating.

So what's the solution? Help your child become an informed eater who knows how to make responsible food choices. Here's how:

- **Expose him to a variety of foods.**  
Go grocery shopping together and try one new food each week.

- **Make it easy for him to eat well.**  
Get rid of soda and junk food. Fill your fridge with washed, cut veggies and fruit.
- **Insist on breakfast.** It really is the most important meal of the day, so don't let your child skip it.

**Source:** G. Chen, "How Diet and Nutrition Impact a Child's Learning Ability," Public School Review, niswc.com/mid\_nutrition.

**"Good health and good sense are two of life's greatest blessings."**

—Publilius Syrus

## Be aware of the dangers of social media for middle schoolers



The average middle schooler spends nine hours a day connected to social media. So it is no wonder that their online "friends" have such an outsized influence on what they think.

However, not everyone your child interacts with online is a real friend. In fact, kids can lose connections with the people they see every day because they spend so much time online. (And who has 639 friends in real life anyway?)

But this is not the only danger of social media for middle school students. Their brains are just not wired to use it responsibly. Their frontal cortex, which is what helps adults manage distractions and plan ahead, is not well-developed yet. This means that middle schoolers lack the maturity to use social media appropriately.

In addition, children can easily become addicted to social media,

which can lead to future addictive behaviors.

To protect your child:

- **Delay.** If she isn't on social media, wait. The longer you delay, the better.
- **Set limits.** Don't allow devices at mealtime. Keep devices out of your child's bedroom overnight.
- **Talk about what is appropriate** to post and what's not.
- **Stay connected.** Follow her social media accounts and be sure she knows you will look at them.
- **Create a family account.** This lets your middle schooler stay in touch with friends, but in a safer space.
- **Schedule family time.** Middle school is a time when your child needs you more than ever. So plan time to do things together—with the devices turned off!

**Source:** V.L. Dunckley, "Why Social Media Is Not Smart for Middle School Kids," *Psychology Today*, niswc.com/mid\_social.

## Are you helping your child handle new relationships?



As early as it seems, the middle school years are when many kids have their first girlfriend or boyfriend. Are you helping your child navigate this tricky time?

Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

\_\_\_ **1. Have you talked to your child** about the basics of dating—respect for yourself, respect for the other person, kindness and consideration?

\_\_\_ **2. Are you remaining calm?** Many middle school relationships are more about friendship than they are about getting "serious."

\_\_\_ **3. Have you discussed rules** about relationships with your child and reminded him that school comes first?

\_\_\_ **4. Do you show respect** for your child's feelings?

\_\_\_ **5. Do you talk** about your family's values regarding appropriate behavior? Have you talked about all of the consequences of risky behavior?

**How well are you doing?**

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are preparing your middle schooler to handle this new phase. For *no* answers, try those ideas in the quiz.

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# Offer your child strategies for taking effective class notes



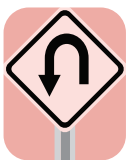
Every student needs good note-taking skills to succeed in school.

Without them, it would be nearly impossible to remember everything a teacher says in class.

Share these note-taking pointers with your middle schooler:

- **Write down lists.** If the teacher says, “Here are five causes of the Revolutionary War,” your child should write them down.
- **Write down what’s on the board.** Information a teacher takes time to write on the board is usually something your child should learn.
- **Take advantage of pauses.** When the teacher pauses after saying something, she is likely giving students time to write.
- **Listen for “extreme” words.** Anytime a teacher describes a concept as the *best*, the *weakest* or the *last*, your child should take note of it.
- **Write down information** that the teacher repeats. Teachers reinforce concepts they really want students to know.
- **Stay with it.** Teachers sometimes squeeze in important information near the end of class if they realize they are running out of time.

# Middle school years are key for preventing substance abuse



Drugs change brains. So once people become addicted to drugs, it will always be harder to stop using them.

Brain researchers know the best way to prevent drug abuse is to keep people from ever using drugs. The middle school years are a time when prevention messages are most important in preventing drug abuse.

Times of transition make people more likely to turn to drugs. Adults who face job loss or divorce may use drugs to feel better. For adolescents, the challenge of changing schools can also make drugs seem appealing. Middle schoolers face new classmates, new classes and a new building. No wonder they feel challenged.

At the same time, middle schoolers want to try new things. Drugs and alcohol may seem appealing because they are new. Since middle schoolers’

judgment and decision-making skills are still developing, they may not see the risks associated with this behavior.

What can you do as a parent?

- **Ask your child** what he has learned in school about substance abuse. Reinforce those messages at home.
- **Send clear messages.** Let your child know he should avoid all drugs, including alcohol and cigarettes. Also talk about the problem of misusing prescription drugs.
- **Set clear rules and enforce them.** Praise appropriate behavior. Parents who are consistent find they don’t have to be punitive.
- **Build a strong relationship** with your child. Do things together as a family. Enjoy spending time on shared activities.
- **Be a good role model.** Your example is the most powerful teacher.

Source: “Preventing Drug Abuse: The Best Strategy,” National Institute on Drug Abuse, [nida.nih.gov/mid\\_braindrug](http://nida.nih.gov/mid_braindrug).

**Q:** I caught my daughter copying all the answers from her friend’s homework. She says that it’s not a big deal and that everyone in middle school does it. What should I do?

## Questions & Answers

**A:** Cheating is a serious issue. Experts suggest setting aside time to talk and really listen to your child.

Tell her that cheating *is* a big deal and it is wrong. It’s dishonest and unfair to those who don’t cheat. Plus it robs her of learning the skills and information she will need for success in life.

Let your child know that you are unhappy about her cheating, but you’re also worried about the cause. Why did she feel the need to cheat? Is she afraid of disappointing you or getting punished for less-than-perfect grades? Is she trying to get special rewards for top grades?

Make sure you’re not putting too much emphasis on getting perfect grades. Also be sure to stress the importance of learning for learning’s sake—not just to get a reward.

Work together to find a solution that will help her complete work without cheating. To support your child:

- **Help her manage her time.** If she doesn’t feel like she has time to finish her homework, she may be overscheduled.
- **Help her improve** her study habits so she can make better grades on her own.
- **Encourage her to ask** her teacher for help if she doesn’t understand the homework.

If the problem persists, talk to your child’s teacher. Together you will be able to get your daughter back on the right track.

# It Matters: Attendance

## After-school activities offer many benefits



Middle schoolers often have access to after-school programs either at school or in the community. Many such

programs are academic. Others help your child do better in school in other ways. Regular attendance in such programs may be worthwhile.

In fact, research shows that regular attendance in after-school programs leads to:

- **Better social skills.** That includes being able to communicate and solve problems.
- **Better performance in school.** That includes higher grades and more completion of homework.
- **Healthier habits.** That includes avoiding tobacco and drug use.
- **Improved school attendance.** The sense of belonging and the connection to caring adults can make children more likely to go to school.

To help your middle schooler reap these benefits:

- **Find safe transportation.** Some after-school programs include bus transportation. If a program doesn't, your child may be able to travel in a car pool or by community bus.
- **Consider home schedules.** Of course your child has responsibilities at home. Try adjusting these so your child can attend a program.
- **Look for a program** that interests your child. At the very least, ask her to give it a chance.

**Source:** H.N. Chang and P.W. Jordan, "Building a Culture of Attendance: Schools and Afterschool Programs Together Can and Should Make a Difference!" The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project, [niscw.com/attendance-afterschool](http://niscw.com/attendance-afterschool).

## Why is it so important for your middle schooler to be in school?

**E**very day of school is important. But after winter break, the consequences of missing days of school can be especially tough on your child. She should be in school every day unless she is ill.

Here's why:

- **Once the year is half over**, many teachers turn a serious eye to the end-of-year exams. The pace of instruction picks up. It becomes more difficult to catch up after missed days.
- **In just a few weeks**, if not sooner, teachers will also begin to review for these exams. This review will go on at the same time as regular teaching.
- **Your child may have more homework** as a result of faster instruction and review. The more time she is out of school, the more the homework piles up. And she will be required to turn it all in.



To support your child's attendance, continue to:

- **Emphasize to your child** the importance of being in every class. Arriving on time is important, too!
- **Accept no excuses** except true illness or emergency for having your child miss school.
- **Avoid making plans** for your child that would require her to miss school.

## Reduced stress can improve your child's attendance, learning



Students who experience stress are at risk of having attendance problems and difficulty focusing at school.

To help your middle schooler manage stress, suggest that he:

- **Take a deep breath.** It sounds simple, but it works surprisingly well. Taking time to stop and think about the issue at hand may help your child put it into perspective and discover a solution.
- **Focus on health.** Twenty to 30 minutes of exercise can relieve tension and clear your child's head. Eating right and getting adequate sleep every night will also keep your child feeling his best.
- **Keep a journal.** Some kids find that it's easier to write down their feelings than to talk about them. This is a great way to relieve stress—and your child will be strengthening his writing skills at the same time.