

10 Ways to Keep Your Child on Track for Academic Success in Middle School

Parental support plays a crucial role in helping preteens and teens succeed in middle school. But as students grow more independent during these years, it can be challenging for parents to know which situations call for involvement and which ones call for a more behind-the-scenes approach.

1. Attend Back-to-School Night and Parent-Teacher Conferences

Preteens and teens do better in school when parents are involved in their academic lives. Attending back-to-school night at the start of the school year is a great way to get to know your child's teachers and their expectations. School administrators may discuss school-wide programs and policies, too

Attending parent-teacher conferences is another way to stay informed. These may be held once or twice a year at progress reporting periods. Many middle schools, however, only set up parent-teacher conferences if parental involvement is needed to address issues like behavior problems, falling below grade-level expectations, or alternatively, benefiting from advanced class work.

If your child has special learning or behavioral needs, meetings can be scheduled with teachers and other school staff to consider setting up or revising individualized education plans (IEPs), 504 education plans, or gifted education plans.

Keep in mind that parents or guardians can request meetings with teachers, principals, school counselors, or other school staff any time during the school year.

2. Visit the School and Its Website

Knowing the physical layout of the school building and grounds can help you connect with your child when you talk about his or her school day. It's good to know the location of the main office, school nurse, cafeteria, gym, athletic fields, auditorium, and special classes.

On the school website, you can find information about:

- the school calendar
- contacting school staff
- special events like dances and class trips
- testing dates
- sign-up information and schedules for sports, clubs, and other extracurricular activities

Many teachers maintain their own websites that provide access to textbooks and other resources, and detail homework assignments, and test and quiz dates. Special resources for parents and students are also usually available on the district, school, or teacher websites.

3. Support Homework Expectations

During the middle school years, homework gets more intense and the time spent will probably be longer than during the elementary years, usually a total of 1 to 2 hours each school night.

An important way to help is to make sure your child has a quiet, well-lit, distraction-free place to study that's stocked with supplies. Distraction-free means no phone, TV or websites other than homework-related resources. And be sure to check in from time to time to make sure that your child hasn't gotten distracted.

Sit down with your child regularly to talk about class loads and make sure they're balanced. It's also a good idea to set a specific start time for homework each night. Helping preteens and teens establish a homework schedule sends a message that academics are a priority.

Encourage your child to ask for help when it's needed. Most teachers are available for extra help before or after school, and also might be able to recommend other resources.

4. Send Your Child to School Ready to Learn

A nutritious breakfast fuels up middle schoolers and gets them ready for the day. In general, preteens and teens who eat breakfast have more energy and do better in school.

You can help boost your child's attention span, concentration, and memory by providing breakfast foods that are rich in whole grains, fiber, and protein, as well as low in added sugar. If your child is running late some mornings, send along fresh fruit, nuts, yogurt, or a peanut butter and banana sandwich. Many schools provide nutritious breakfast options before the first bell.

Preteens and teens also need the right amount of sleep to be alert and ready to learn all day. In general, preteens need about 10 to 12 hours of sleep each night and teens need about 8½ to 9½ hours.

Bedtime difficulties can arise at this age for a variety of reasons. Homework, sports, after-school activities, texting, TVs, computers, and video games, as well as hectic family schedules, can contribute to students not getting enough sleep.

Lack of sleep can make it difficult for preteens and teens to pay attention in school. It's important to have a consistent bedtime routine, especially on school nights.

5. Instill Organization Skills

No one is born with great organizational skills — they have to be learned and practiced. Being organized is a key to success in middle school, where most students first encounter multiple teachers and classrooms on a daily basis, and where some students are participating in extracurricular or after-school activities for the first time. Because time management skills are usually not explicitly taught in school, preteens and teens can benefit from parents helping with organizing assignments and managing time.

Class information and assignments should be organized by subject in binders, notebooks, or folders. Teach your child how to use a calendar or personal planner to stay organized and schedule study times. Calendars or planners should include your child's non-academic commitments to help with time management.

It's also a good idea to make sure your preteen or teen knows how to make a daily to-do list to prioritize tasks and manage time. An after-school to-do list can be as simple as:

1. *swim practice*
2. *walk the dog*
3. *(dinner)*
4. *study for social studies test*
5. *finish math worksheet*
6. *read over science class notes*
7. *put clothes away*

6. Teach Study Skills

Planning is a big part of helping your middle-schooler study for tests now that he or she is juggling work from multiple teachers.

Be sure you both know when tests are scheduled, and plan enough study time before each. When there's a lot to study, help determine roughly how much time it will take to study for each test, then make a study calendar so your child doesn't have to study for multiple tests all in one night.

Remind your child to take notes in class, organize them by subject, and review them at home each day.

Help your child review material and study with easy techniques like simple questioning, asking to provide the missing word, and creating practice tests. The more processes the brain uses to handle information — such as writing, reading, speaking, and listening — the more likely the information will be retained. Repeating words, re-reading passages aloud, re-writing notes, or visualizing or drawing information all help the brain retain data. Remind your child that it usually takes a number of tries to remember something correctly.

In math or science, doing practice problems is a great way to review for tests. Your child can ask the teacher for appropriate online practice resources.

And remember that getting a good night's sleep is smarter than cramming. Recent studies show that students who sacrifice sleep to study are more likely to struggle on tests the next day.

7. Know the Disciplinary and Bullying Policies

Schools usually cite disciplinary policies (sometimes called the student code of conduct) in student handbooks. The rules usually cover expectations, as well as consequences for not meeting the expectations, for things like student behavior, dress codes, use of electronic devices, and acceptable language.

The policies may include details about attendance, vandalism, cheating, fighting, and weapons. Many schools also have specific policies about bullying. It's helpful to know the school's definition of bullying, consequences for bullies, support for victims, and procedures for reporting bullying.

It's important for your preteen or teen to know what's expected at school and that you'll support the school's consequences when expectations aren't met. It's easiest for students when school expectations match the ones at home, so they see both environments as safe and caring places that work together as a team.

8. Get Involved

Volunteering at your child's middle school is a great way to show you're interested in his or her education.

Keep in mind, though, that while some middle school students like to see their parents at school or school events, others may feel embarrassed by their parents' presence. Follow your child's cues to determine how much interaction works for both of you, and whether your volunteering should stay behind the scenes. Make it clear that you aren't there to spy — you're just trying to help out the school community.

Parents can get involved by:

- serving as a grade-level chairperson
- organizing and/or working at fundraising activities and other special events, like bake sales, car washes, and book fairs
- chaperoning field trips, dances, and proms
- attending school board meetings
- joining the school's parent-teacher group
- working as a library assistant
- mentoring or tutoring students
- reading a story to the class
- giving a talk for career day
- attending school concerts, plays, and athletic events

Check the school or school district website to find volunteer opportunities that fit your schedule. Even giving a few hours during the school year can make an impression on your child.

9. Take Attendance Seriously

Middle schoolers should take a sick day if they have a fever, are nauseated, vomiting, or have diarrhea. Otherwise, it's important that they arrive at school on time every day, because having to catch up with class work, projects, tests, and homework can be stressful and interfere with learning.

Middle schoolers may have many reasons for not wanting to go to school — bullies, difficult assignments, low grades, social problems, or issues with classmates or teachers. Talk with your child — and then perhaps with an administrator or school counselor — to find out more about what's causing any anxiety.

Students also may be late for school due to changes in their body clocks. During adolescence, the body's circadian rhythm (an internal biological clock) is reset, telling a teen to fall asleep later at night and wake up later in the morning. Keeping your teen on a consistent daily sleep schedule can help avoid tiredness and tardiness.

For students who have a chronic health issue, educators will work with the families and may limit workloads or assignments so students can stay on track.

10. Make Time to Talk About School

Staying connected with preteens and teens as they grow more independent can be a challenge for parents, but it's more important than ever. While activities at school, new interests, and expanding social circles can become more central to the lives of many middle school students, parents and guardians are still their anchors for providing love, guidance, and support.

Make efforts to talk with your child every day, so he or she knows that what goes on at school is important to you. When preteens and teens know their parents are interested in their academic lives, they'll take school seriously as well.

Because communication is a two-way street, the way you talk and listen to your child can influence how well he or she listens and responds. It's important to listen carefully, make eye contact, and avoid multitasking while you chat. Be sure to ask open-ended questions that go beyond "yes" or "no" answers.

Besides during family meals, good times to talk include car trips (though eye contact isn't needed here, of course), walking the dog, preparing meals, or standing in line at a store.

When preteens and teens know they can talk openly with their parents, the challenges of middle school can be a little easier to face.