

# Middle Years

Working Together for School Success



## Short Stops

### Connect after school

Your middle grader may not feel like talking the minute he gets home from school. Try simply saying, “Hi, I hope your day went well!” and giving him time to relax. Later, you might ask about a class or an assignment, such as what he did in art or how his history presentation went.

### A load off your back

Carrying a heavy backpack can strain muscles and cause shoulder, neck, and back pain. Let your tween weigh herself and then her backpack to make sure it's no more than 10–20 percent of her body weight. Also, she should carry the bag over both shoulders so the weight is evenly distributed.

### Guess my number

This fun family game stretches your child's logical thinking skills. Take turns choosing a number between 1 and 100. Have everyone else ask yes or no questions (“Is it odd?” “Is it more than 60?”) until someone figures out the correct number. Then, that person picks a new range (say, between 475 and 600) and a new secret number.

### Worth quoting

“Never mind what others do; do better than yourself, beat your own record from day to day, and you are a success.” *William J. H. Boetcker*

### Just for fun

**Q:** Who is strong enough to move a castle?

**A:** A chess player!



## A+ organizing strategies

As the school year gets underway, your middle grader will be calmer and more confident if she knows she's on top of things. Strategies like these can help her get organized.

### Create “command centers”

Encourage your tween to keep school-related materials in specific places so she'll always know where they are. She could store homework supplies on a kitchen shelf or in a box on her bedroom desk. Have her choose a spot near the front door for items like her backpack, musical instrument, and gym shoes so they'll be ready to go when she is.



file what she needs and throw away what she doesn't.

### Use “5-minute wonders”

Suggest these habits that take only a few minutes. Before leaving school each day, she can scan her planner to check dates and deadlines for tests, assignments, and forms. That way, she'll know which books and papers to take home. At home, she could quickly leaf through her folders and notebooks, then

### Keep an estimate log

Knowing how long tasks actually take will give your tween an edge when organizing her time. Suggest that she time herself completing different types of schoolwork, such as doing research for a report or reviewing Spanish vocabulary. She could write the times in her planner and refer to them later to help her budget accurately in the future. 👍

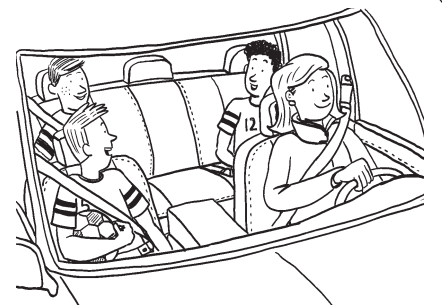
## Part of the group

Joining an extracurricular activity gives your child a productive—and fun—way to spend his free time. Try these ideas.

■ **Find a good fit.** Suggest that your middle grader listen to morning announcements or check the school website for a list of activities. He can ask the coach or advisor for more details about ones he's interested in.

■ **Arrange transportation.** Set up a carpool with other parents. Or have him find out whether there's a late bus he can ride and get the schedule.

■ **Show interest.** If he joins a sports team, cheer him on at games or meets. Or if he's in the science club, ask him to tell you about an experiment he enjoyed. 👍



# Homework: Smooth sailing

In middle school, your tween is the captain of the ship when it comes to handling homework. He can sail smoothly with these tips.

**Discuss expectations.** Encourage your child to think about what he expects of himself. He might say he will turn in assignments when they're due and get in the habit of looking over math problems to be sure he didn't



make careless mistakes. Also, let him know what you expect when it comes to homework. Consider writing down your expectations, such as doing his best and turning assignments in when they're due.

**Step back.** Have your middle grader decide when to do homework, whether it's after school or after dinner. When it's time for him to start, be matter-of-fact.

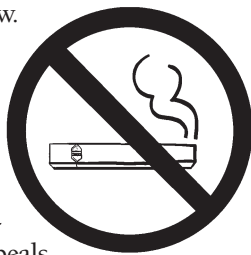
You could say, "Looks like it's time to do homework. Let me know if you need anything." Then, allow him to work independently. This shows him you have confidence in his abilities and encourages him to take responsibility for his own work. 👍

## What is "vaping"?

The good news: Fewer middle schoolers are smoking cigarettes. The bad news: More tweens are vaping, or using electronic cigarettes. Here's what you need to know.

### What it is:

Electronic devices are used to inhale vapor that usually contains nicotine. Vaping appeals to kids because it comes in flavors like cotton candy or bubble gum. The devices are often small and easy to hide—some even look like flash drives and can be plugged into laptops to charge.



**Why it's dangerous:** Nicotine is addictive, and it harms growing brains and lungs. And the verdict is still out on what additional damage the chemicals could cause.

**What you can do:** Don't allow any type of smoking, and let your child know the consequences if she breaks this rule. Also, be on the lookout for signs of vaping, such as giant clouds of vapor or unexplained odors. And search for images of e-cigarettes online so you'll know what they look like. 👍



## Parent to Parent

### Encourage initiative

I mentioned to my neighbor Jeanne what helpful kids she has, since I often see them getting the mail or working in their yard. Jeanne said they do a lot without being asked, so I wanted to know her secret to raising children who take initiative!

Jeanne explained that when her youngest started middle school, she went back to work and had less time to do things around the house. So she taught her kids that rather than waiting for her to change the trash bag or start the dishwasher, they needed to handle those things themselves. Eventually, they got used to taking on bigger roles in the household.

I decided to take a page from Jeanne's book and have my daughter start doing her laundry and packing her snack. After the first few days, I stopped reminding her—and when she didn't have clean clothes or a snack, she learned to remind herself. She may not offer to do the gardening overnight, but at least I'm sending the right message! 👍



## Q&A

### In school every day

**Q** Last year, my son asked to stay home when he was tired or "needed a break." I know he has a lot to do—should I let him stay home occasionally?

**A** One of the best ways to help your child have a successful year is to make sure he attends school every day from start to finish.

Start the year by reading the attendance policy in the school handbook together. That way, you'll both be on the same page about what counts as

an acceptable reason for missing school, such as illness or a family emergency.

Then if he asks for a "day off," explain that learning is his job. To keep up with new material and participate in class, he has to be there. You can let him know that his days off come during winter break and spring break. Regular attendance at school now will create a habit that he'll continue throughout his school years—and one day, on the job. 👍



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### Get going with breakfast

Eating breakfast will help your tween start the day ready to learn. Together, come up with quick and nutritious breakfasts to make at home. Or encourage her to eat a healthy meal in the cafeteria with friends. *Note:* If she receives school lunch at a reduced price or for free, her breakfast will be reduced cost or free, too.

### Walk this way

Let your middle grader know it's important to keep his eyes on his surroundings as he walks. He'll avoid serious injury from falling, running into objects, or stepping into traffic. Explain that he shouldn't play electronic games, listen to music, or text while walking—including to and from the bus stop or school.

### Conserve resources

Ask your youngster to help your family be more environmentally friendly. Have her research ways you can conserve resources (switch to low-energy light bulbs, recycle more items, take reusable bags when you shop). Then, try to adopt one of her ideas each month.

### Worth quoting

"Every strike brings me closer to the next home run." *Babe Ruth*

### Just for fun

**Q:** Why did the boy put honey under his pillow?

**A:** He wanted to have sweet dreams.



## Tween discipline that works

Your middle schooler wants more freedom. You want to keep him safe and set age-appropriate limits. How do you balance his need for independence with the need for rules and consequences? Try these strategies.

### Let's review

Go over the rules you have in place and get his input. He'll be happier to comply if he has a say in them. Perhaps he thinks he should be able to go to friends' houses on school nights, and you agree to that for one night a week. Explain your reasons, and be clear you have the final word. Also, lay out consequences so he knows what will happen if he breaks the rules.

### Expect to be tested

Tweens tend to push the limits to see how serious parents are and may argue to get out of consequences. Stay calm and on point ("Nevertheless, we agreed you wouldn't eat in your bedroom"). Stick to the consequence you set (having him wash his bedding to get rid of food



stains). He'll see he can't slide by and will be more likely to follow the rules in the future.

### Reflect on actions

The goal of discipline is to teach your child good judgment. He can learn a lot by reflecting on his actions. Say he breaks a rule, like heading to a social outing without finishing his homework first. Ask what he *thought* would happen. Maybe he didn't think you'd notice. What happened instead? He has to miss an event this weekend as a result. How could he avoid this situation next time? 👍

## Speak up!

Participating in class can help your tween get more value out of school and learn to express herself. Encourage her to contribute with these tips.

■ **Find your zone.** Suggest that she participate in ways she feels comfortable with and then expand her "toolbox." She might start off commenting on assigned readings she enjoyed. Eventually, she may speak up when she agrees with someone's viewpoint or to offer a different one.

■ **Mix it up.** Class-wide discussions aren't the only opportunity to participate. When your middle schooler works in smaller groups, she could ask and answer questions, make observations, or give opinions. These steps can build confidence for talking in front of the whole class. 👍





# Real-world reading

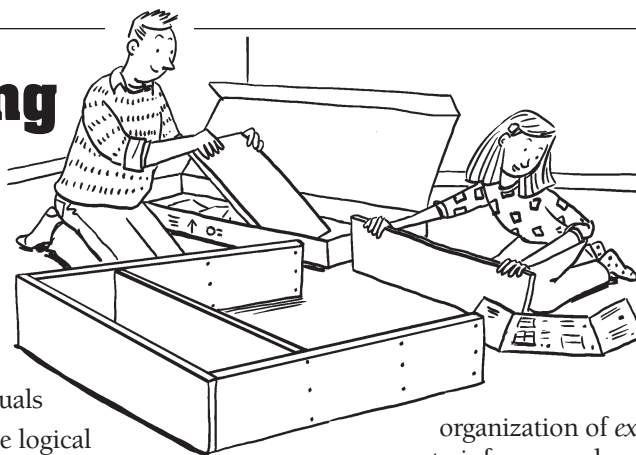
Nonfiction reading is a big part of everyday adult life—at work and home. To help your middle grader learn to pick out and analyze important information, encourage her to read more nonfiction texts now. Here are some easy ideas.

## Follow a process

**What:** Recipes, game directions, how-to manuals

**Why:** These texts teach youngsters to navigate logical sequences of steps and identify key details.

**How:** Let your tween read and share directions as family members cook or play a game. Or have her read instructions



as you put together a bookcase or figure out how to operate a new phone or microwave.

## Follow the facts

**What:** News articles, menus, travel guidebooks

**Why:** Your child will get familiar with the organization of *expository text*, which seeks to inform or educate readers.

**How:** Talk about news articles you read and what you learn, and inspire her to do the same. If you order carryout food, have her read menus and place the order. When you visit new places, ask her to scan guidebooks and share facts. She can play tour leader, suggesting sights and activities your family will enjoy. 👍

## Notable notes

Good notes can help your tween remember what was taught in class, create study guides, and review for tests. Share these steps for being an excellent note taker.

**1. Prepare beforehand.** Your child will have an easier time keeping up with the teacher if he has read the assigned handouts or chapters. Why? He'll be familiar with the material and vocabulary.

**2. Learn each teacher's style.** To emphasize crucial material, one teacher may use hand gestures, while another may write phrases on the board. Your middle grader should write that information down and star or circle it.

**3. Ask questions.** If your child doesn't understand something, he could jot a question mark in the margin of his notes. Then, he can ask about it when the teacher invites questions. Most likely someone else has the same question and will be glad he spoke up. 👍



## Q&A

### Learning to have grit

**Q** I've heard that kids need "grit" to be successful. What is it, and how can I teach it to my 12-year-old?

**A** Grit involves perseverance, courage, and resilience—basically sticking with tasks or goals until you see them through. Having passion will help your child to develop grit, enabling her to stay with something when the going gets tough and to overcome problems along the way.

You can foster grit in your middle grader by explaining it and pointing out examples, such as a coworker who learned to read as an adult. Or bring home library books about famous people who persevered. For instance, Dr. Seuss had his first book rejected by 27 publishers before it was accepted.

Setting up a family challenge can give everyone a chance to be "gritty." Have each person choose something they want to do that might be difficult but is possible. The key? No one is allowed to quit! 👍



## Parent to Parent

### Get to know new friends

When my son was in elementary school, I always knew his friends. Once he got to middle school, he started hanging out with classmates I'd never heard of.

It worried me to let Jake spend time with kids I didn't know. I asked him to invite them over, and meeting them in person helped put me at ease and gave me a

way to connect faces with names. I asked for their phone numbers and their parents' numbers as well. That way, I could contact them if they were with Jake and I couldn't reach him. Calling the parents to say hello opened the door in case we ever need to get in touch.

I'm still getting to know Jake's pals. But at least I'm feeling more relaxed about his new middle school social scene. 👍



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### Conferences in middle school

A parent-teacher conference is the perfect opportunity to work with the school to support your child. You may meet with one of his teachers who will share information from all the others. Or you might spend a few minutes with each teacher. If you have questions for specific teachers or need more time with them, call or email to follow up.

### Fit in fitness

An hour of daily physical activity promotes good health. Suggest that your tween calculate how many minutes of exercise she gets each day. She could include walking to school and participating in PE. Encourage her to add more exercise, perhaps by meeting a friend to swim at an indoor pool or by following along with a Zumba video.

### Promptness, please

Being at his desk when the bell rings means your middle grader won't miss class instruction or important announcements. Have him add a five-minute "cushion" to his morning so he has time to deal with the unexpected (missing shoe, early bus).

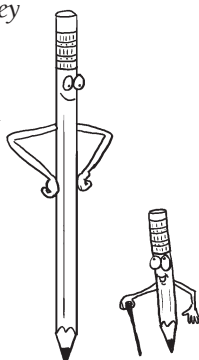
### Worth quoting

"I am not a product of my circumstances. I am a product of my decisions." *Stephen Covey*

### Just for fun

**Q:** What's tall when it's new and short when it's old?

**A:** A pencil.



## Study secrets—revealed

Anna knows what she needs to accomplish when she sits down to study. She stays focused and tends to remember the material. Her secret? Strong study skills! Share these strategies with your tween.

**Skill:** Set goals.

**Strategy:** Encourage your child to jot down specific goals for each study session and check off each one as she meets it. She should be as detailed as possible. *Example:* "Learn 30 vocabulary words before Friday's Spanish test." It may also help to make deals with herself. ("I can take a break after I've learned 15 words.")

**Skill:** Stay focused.

**Strategy:** Suggest that your middle grader eliminate distractions before she studies. For instance, she should silence her phone and put it in another room. Hunger and



fatigue can also make her mind wander, so she could eat a healthy snack or go for a quick jog before she buckles down.

**Skill:** Monitor understanding.

**Strategy:** After your tween reviews her notes, handouts, and textbook, she can make up a quiz. Taking the quiz and checking her answers will show her what she still needs to work on. Have her write anything she doesn't understand on a sticky note and ask her teacher for help. 👍

## Spotlight on history

History is full of fascinating places and intriguing people for your child to discover. With these ideas, he can step into the past—right in your living room:

■ Work separately or together to create something fun that represents a time period. For instance, your family might build a Lego model of an Egyptian pyramid. Or tape large sheets of paper to a wall, and draw or paint an Aztec mural.

■ Have each person secretly pick a historical figure to research, maybe Benjamin Franklin or Amelia Earhart. Then, host a game show where everyone asks yes-or-no questions to guess each other's characters. 👍



# Serving our community

Volunteering as a family can teach your middle grader about empathy and helping others. Here's how to get started.

**1.** Have your tween research community service opportunities for families. He should list ideas that match the ages of family members, and also jot down the time involved for each job. He could visit websites such as *createthegood.org* and *volunteermatch.org*. He might also call or email community centers, shelters, and places of worship to ask if they need help.



**2.** Review your child's list together. Talk about possibilities that interest everyone, and pick one to sign up for. If your family loves animals, maybe you could feed and play with dogs and cats in a shelter. Or if you like to cook together, maybe you'll volunteer at a soup kitchen or a fire station's spaghetti dinner.

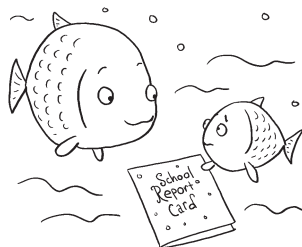
**3.** Talk about those you'll be helping, such as people who don't have enough to eat or animals who need attention and comfort. Considering how others feel will show your middle grader how important it is to help out—and make your volunteer experience more meaningful. 👍



## Parent to Parent Report cards: Find the positives

My sixth-grade daughter just got her first report card with letter grades. In elementary school, she always received "Excellent" or "Good," so I was surprised to see a C in English.

I decided to focus on the positives first. I pointed out Chelsea's good attendance, an A in science, and a nice comment from her chorus teacher.



Then, we discussed her English grade. Chelsea said she had fallen behind on assigned readings. As a result, she struggled to answer comprehension questions and participate in class discussions. We brainstormed solutions, including reading a certain number of pages each night and jotting down points to make in class.

Chelsea said that when she gets her next report card, she hopes that one of the first things I can point out will be a B in English! 👍

## Same answer, different strategies

There's often more than one way to approach a math problem. Try these tips for using family game night to help your tween talk through math strategies—and see that for herself!

**Monopoly.** When a player decides to buy (or not to buy) a property or add houses or hotels, have her share her thinking. Your child might calculate how many times an opponent would need to land on her properties to cover the cost. Or she could total her cash, subtract the cost of the hotels, and consider her liability (the rent she would owe if she lands on other players' properties before getting "paid" again).



**Yahtzee.** Let family members explain how they determine where to record their rolls of the dice. Say your middle grader gets four sixes and one five. Will she score it as four of a kind or as her sixes roll? Perhaps she'll consider the probability of rolling four of a kind again (unlikely) and decide to check off four of a kind rather than risk scoring zero in that spot. Or maybe she'll count it as sixes, which will put her on the path to earning a bonus. 👍

## Concern about anxiety

**Q** Several of my friends and neighbors have mentioned that their kids have anxiety. My son gets stressed out sometimes—could he suffer from anxiety, too?

**A** It's normal for middle graders to feel stressed from time to time about school, friends, or growing up. But if they're excessively anxious for long periods of time and miss

out on activities because of it, that may signal a bigger problem.

Anxiety disorder symptoms include worrying persistently for weeks or months, trouble sleeping, frequent headaches or stomachaches, and avoiding school or friends.

If you notice any of these symptoms in your son, contact your pediatrician. She can refer you to a specialist if necessary. 👍



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