

Middle School Parents[®]

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Region 16 ESC Title III Program

still make the difference!



Focusing praise on effort may not promote learning

Parents and teachers know that students' attitudes can affect their learning. Students who believe that intelligence can grow over time tend to do better than those who think that people are just born smart or not.

So you'd think that praising your middle schooler's effort would help him develop this growth mindset. However, research reveals that in kids this age, focusing praise on students' effort can backfire.

As students reach middle school, they often admire others who seem to succeed without much effort. So when they get praised only for their effort, they can feel put down.

To help your child develop the growth mindset he needs to learn and succeed:

- 1. Reinforce the value of mistakes.** When he earns a disappointing grade, tell him to think about what went wrong—and what he can learn from it.
- 2. Ask him to reflect on his learning.** If he has made progress in a tough class, help him see how far he's come.
- 3. Focus on strategies.** Help your child think about the specific things he did to succeed and encourage him to try those things again.
- 4. Support healthy friendships.** Being friends with other kids who want to do their best can give your child the motivation he needs to succeed.

Source: J. Amemiya and M. Wang, "Why Effort Praise Can Backfire in Adolescence," *Child Development Perspectives*, Society for Research in Child Development.

Physical activity is linked to academic gains



Exercise helps your child build the strong body she needs for good health. And research suggests that exercise also has benefits that support performance in school.

Studies show that students who are active perform better in school than students who aren't active.

Exercise can help:

- **Increase the flow of oxygen and blood** to your child's brain. This can help her stay alert and concentrate on what she's learning.
- **Put your child in a better mood.** Exercise is known to increase positive feelings and reduce stress. Stress and anxiety work against school progress.
- **Increase your child's energy** so she has more stamina to study.
- **Reinforce certain lessons** that help your child do better in school. This is especially true if she is on a sports team. Sports require players to follow rules, control their bodies and take turns. These actions are also associated with school success.

Source: A. Barbosa and others, "Physical Activity and Academic Achievement: An Umbrella Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

School counselors provide support in challenging times



The pandemic has left many students struggling—both academically and mentally. Middle school counselors are here to help. They have specialized training that allows them to understand and support students as they face the unique challenges of middle school.

Your child's school counselor can help her:

- **Set and meet goals.** The counselor can help your child define what she hopes to achieve in school this year and beyond. The counselor can then suggest classes and activities to help her meet those goals.
- **Resolve conflicts.** If your child is struggling with something in

school—whether academic or social—her counselor can guide her through it.

- **Find extra support.** From therapy to tutoring, the counselor can assist with finding outside resources that can help your student thrive.

“Middle school counselors enhance the learning process and promote academic, career and social/emotional development.”

—American School Counselor Association

Speak frankly with your child about drugs and alcohol



In middle school, children are far more likely to be exposed to drugs and alcohol than they were in elementary school.

That's why it's vital that you speak honestly and openly to your child about the dangers of substance abuse.

Address common misconceptions and questions that kids have, such as:

- **“If it's so bad for you, why do you and other adults drink?”** Alcohol use is legal for adults 21 and older. Adults, with mature brains, can safely consume limited amounts of alcohol, if they choose. There is no safe amount of alcohol for a growing brain.
- **“As long as no one is driving, it's not a big deal.”** Alcohol and recreational drugs are both dangerous and illegal for middle

schoolers. An arrest for either one will establish a record. Use at school can lead to suspension or expulsion.

- **“My friends say trying it a few times won't hurt anyone.”** In fact, studies have shown that young brains are especially susceptible to drug and alcohol addictions.
- **“Everyone says it makes you feel good.”** The “good” feeling is temporary and deceiving. Drug and alcohol abuse can lead to a short-term “crash” and illness. In the long term, both physical and mental health can be damaged.

If you or anyone in your family is struggling with substance abuse, call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357). The call is confidential.

Are you boosting your child's concentration?



Does your child have the winter blahs? If so, his concentration may start to diminish. Are you helping him stay focused? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

- ___ **1. Do you encourage** your child to do a focus-building activity he enjoys? For some kids, this might be reading; for others, it could be sports or chess club.
- ___ **2. Do you set limits** on recreational screen time? Extended time in front of a TV, computer, tablet or smartphone can reduce concentration.
- ___ **3. Do you encourage** your child to finish tasks and then praise him for doing so?
- ___ **4. Do you discourage** multitasking? It's difficult to concentrate on homework if your child is also watching TV and texting friends.
- ___ **5. Do you minimize** interruptions when your child is working hard?

How well are you doing?

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are helping your child keep his mind on task. Mostly *no* answers? Check the quiz for some suggestions.

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Study shows listening to music while studying hinders learning



Some students listen to music almost non-stop. There's a playlist for walking to the bus.

There's a playlist for times when they're with friends. They listen until their coach or their teacher makes them take the ear buds out.

But should your child listen while he's studying? One reading comprehension study says *no*.

Researchers in Cardiff, Wales, set out to find answers to several questions. How does listening to music affect learning something new? Does it matter what type of music students listen to while studying? Would it make a difference if the music had lyrics?

Students were divided into groups. They were asked to learn new material under different conditions. Then they took a test on what they had learned. The answers were clear and consistent. Students who studied in silence did

much better. Their grades were up to 60 percent higher than those of students who listened to music.

Whether students heard pop, rap, hip hop or heavy metal made almost no difference. It's not the type of music—it's the act of listening. When students are listening, their brains don't focus efficiently on learning.

The students who studied in silence said they had fewer distractions. It was easier for them to concentrate on the task at hand.

There are times when listening to music can be helpful. For example, it might relax your child before a test. But mastering new content is hard. It takes focus and attention. So to make the most of study time, make sure your child turns off the music.

Source: N. Perham and H. Currie, "Does listening to preferred music improve reading comprehension performance?" *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Make sure your middle schooler schedules time to unwind



Kids missed out on a lot last year during the pandemic. As a result, many families are enrolling their children

in a variety of extracurricular activities this school year. But signing up for too many structured activities could rob your child of an important chance for some downtime.

To help keep balance in your child's schedule, ask yourself:

- **Is he frequently irritable** or tired? If he has too many things on his to-do list, he may not be getting the proper amount of rest. Experts recommend adolescents get nine to 10 hours of sleep per night.

- **Does he struggle to finish** his homework? If he's taking appropriate level classes but can't seem to get his work done, it may be because he has too many other things on his plate.
- **Do "mystery illnesses"** keep him from participating? If he often gets a stomachache right before basketball practice, it could be a signal that he's doing too much.

If you are concerned about your child's schedule, talk with him. Help him rate his activities in order of importance. Then, encourage him to drop activities that are at the bottom of his list.

Q: I didn't do that well in math when I was in school. Now my daughter is taking a math class that I don't understand. How can I help her when she's struggling with her math homework?

Questions & Answers

A: You can help your daughter with her math homework—even if you don't know how to do it. Here's how:

- **Have a positive attitude.** Several studies show that parents' attitudes about math have a direct effect on their children's achievement in the subject. So avoid saying things like, "I was never very good in math." Instead, say, "Wow, that looks challenging. I know you will be able to figure it out!"
- **Ask your child to explain** the math problem to you. Have her tell you, step by step, how she thinks she should solve it. This is one of the best ways for students to figure out a new math concept.
- **Suggest that your child** write down the steps she has followed when doing her homework. While there may be only one right answer to a problem, there may be many ways to arrive at it. Then, she can show the teacher what she did. If her answer is wrong, the teacher will know where she went off track.
- **Point out times** during the day when you use math. Whether you use math on the job or to double a recipe, your child will see that the subject is one she will always need.
- **Encourage your child** to try hard and work her way through math challenges. Her success will make it easier for her to face other challenges ahead.

It Matters: Motivation

You can guide your child out of a mid-year rut



Students have been in school for several months and summer still seems far away.

This is the time when it is easy for middle schoolers to fall into a mid-year rut.

To help your child remain motivated through the end of the school year:

- **Point out past successes.** Say things like, “Yes, this is a very challenging class. But you did so well on the last test because of all the study time you put in. I know you can do that again with this test!”
- **Have a “one day at a time” attitude.** The last thing your child wants to hear is, “Before you know it, it will be June.” That’s an eternity to a middle schooler. Instead, try, “Hey, it’s Thursday. Just one more quiz and then you can look forward to the weekend.”
- **Spend time together.** Making an ordinary day feel special can really improve your child’s mood and attitude. “I got the ingredients for your favorite dinner. Finish your homework and then come and help me make it. After dinner, we can watch a movie together.”
- **Encourage her to get involved** in a new project that helps others. Volunteering is a wonderful way for your child to get involved in her community. It will also help her shift the focus off herself and onto others who have greater needs.

Students should ask themselves questions when setting goals

Want your middle schooler to be a self-motivated learner? To start a school project well before the due date? To finish schoolwork on time without your having to nag?

Then encourage your child to set goals for each of her classes. Have her answer these questions:

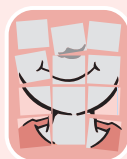
- **“What do I want to achieve** in this class over the next grading period?” This can be a higher grade, or another achievement, such as turning in all homework on time.
- **“What is my plan** for meeting this goal?” Your child could make a study chart and follow it. Or carry a homework folder in her backpack, so that assignments get home and then back to school.
- **“How will I avoid distractions** or barriers that may conflict with my goals?” Your child could turn off her phone during study hours. She could clean up her study space and organize school papers each night.



Once your child has answered these questions for each of her classes, have her write down specific goals and the steps she plans to take to achieve them.

Post the list where you can both see it. Check it frequently to see how things are going, and encourage her to make changes as needed.

Help your middle schooler remain excited about learning



Does your middle schooler have a ho-hum attitude about his classes? To help him get excited about what he’s learning and motivate him to succeed:

- **Let yourself be “wowed.”** Do you give off a “been there, done that” vibe when your child tells you about something he’s learning in school? A fact or idea may not be new to you, but if it’s new to your

child, show some enthusiasm. “Your science teacher poured liquid nitrogen on a flower and it froze? How cool!”

- **Celebrate small victories.** Yes, earning a perfect score on a test is a reason for high-fives. But so is a solid B your child worked hard to achieve. Congratulating him only if he gets A’s may crush his enthusiasm and cause him to think, “Why bother trying at all if only ‘perfect’ matters?”