

Seven steps to succeeding in middle school

Help your child feel confident and perform well in middle school.

By Marian Wilde

Hormones and changing bodies, locker combinations and big campuses, bullies and crushes: Is it any wonder that some middle school students let their grades slip? But even the most flustered kids can succeed when they receive a little extra help at home and school.

A worried parent wrote to GreatSchools: "My son received good grades all through elementary school. When he went into seventh grade, the first year of middle school for him, there was a huge downward shift. I spoke with the principal, teachers and counselor. They said that they have seen a lot of seventh-graders slip at this age. Why should seventh grade make such a difference?"

Bye-bye, cozy elementary school

The transition away from the coziness of elementary school can be hard for some kids. "Children have usually been at their elementary school for a number of years and it starts to feel like home," says Kathy Glass, a former middle school teacher and an author whose focus is curriculum and instruction. "Typically, two or more elementary schools feed into a middle school and this can be a social distraction for a new middle-school student, where old friendships might come undone and new ones develop."

Middle school means "time to get organized"

Middle school requires students to be more independent and better organized. "Students move from one classroom to another as opposed to being in a single, self-contained class with one teacher. Maybe a student is not comfortable with the variety of teachers and their varied expectations. This could be challenging for a child," says Glass.

A parent can listen, sympathize and guide a child through the social and physical maze of adolescence, but it's also important to clearly communicate expectations that he will focus on his work and succeed in school.

Even the most focused child needs parental support when the homework load increases, becomes more difficult and requires analytical skills he may not have developed yet. What can a parent do to help? Here are some suggestions:

Seven steps to getting your child on track

- 1. Offer hands-on guidance.**

If necessary, go to bat for your child with teachers, counselors and other staff at the school. Give generous guidance, including monitoring her homework, while remembering that it's her homework, not yours. You can help by asking questions that lead her to her own solutions. For example:

- What information do you need to do this assignment?
- Where are you going to look for it?
- Where do you think you should begin?
- What do you need to do next?
- Can you describe how you're going to solve this problem?
- What did you try that didn't work?
- What did you try that did work?

2. Help him get organized.

Organization is the key to middle-school success. Help your child develop a system to keep track of important papers. If he tends to forget to turn in homework or can't quite keep track of how he's doing in a class, it might help to get him a binder with a folder in the front for completed work ready to be turned in and a folder in the back for papers returned by the teacher.

Make sure your child has - and uses - a planner to keep track of assignments. Some schools provide these to students, and if not, you might want to work with your PTA or parent organization to provide planners at your school. Help your child get in the habit of writing down each daily assignment in each subject and checking it off when it's complete.

Communicate with your child's teachers. If your child is struggling with organizational skills, talk to the school counselor or teachers about what might be causing the problems and brainstorm approaches to solve them.

3. Teach time-management skills.

Time management becomes vitally important in middle school. Educators often start teaching time-management skills to students in fifth grade, but your child will most likely need reinforcement to make the process a habit.

First, make sure your child refers to her day planner/calendar on a regular basis. Teach her to divide up her work over the number of days allotted for the assignment. This will create smaller, manageable subtasks out of the larger, more daunting tasks. Large projects can create anxiety for students who are new to the process, and you will be helping your child by walking her through it the first few times and by enforcing the schedule you have devised together. A big research project will seem less overwhelming and will be less likely to be left until the last minute if it's done in chunks, each with its own deadline.

Encourage her to estimate how long each assignment will take. She can then plan a realistic schedule, building in study breaks after subjects that are most challenging. Helping your child keep track of time spent studying - rather than staring at a blank page - will help her think about

how she's using her time. If she's spending too much time on a subject that might be a signal she needs extra help or tutoring.

4. Develop note-taking skills.

Teachers will frequently start teaching the basics of note taking in elementary school but some students will need further guidance from parents or tutors. Taking good notes requires students to evaluate, organize and summarize information. It's a key survival skill your child will need through high school and beyond. **Taking notes in class:** Writing at the speed of speech can be daunting even for an adult. These tips may help your student as he develops his own system:

- Start a new page for each new class each day. Date it. Leave space between topics or ideas so you can scan the page more easily later.
- Take down key words and concepts, not sentences. Develop your own system of abbreviations or symbols (such as w/ for with or math symbols such as > or =) to take down key points. Here are some [abbreviations](#) to get you started from the [English-Zone](#) Web site.
- Listen for word clues from the teacher. Teachers often signal what's important to note, using phrases such as "The three incidents that led to the War of 1812 were..." Here are some [examples of word clues](#).
- Review notes after class to make sure they're accurate and complete. Doing this just before starting homework in a particular subject can help a student focus on the topic at hand.

Taking notes from reading: As a student moves through middle school, he'll need to develop the ability to take good notes - from class lectures, reading assignments and research materials. That's where parents can help, says author and California high school teacher Jim Burke.

"Sometimes you have to sit down and say, here's this whole chapter. How do you decide what's important? What are you going to use these notes for? To take a test? To write a paper?" said Burke, whose [The Reader's Handbook](#) explains reading strategies and tools for high school students. "Students who don't take notes well, don't use them," he says. "They lose faith in the process."

Many experts advise students to pre-read a textbook chapter to get an idea about what it is about, rather than simply wading in. Students can grasp the main themes by first reading the introduction text, subheads, graphics, photo captions, summary paragraphs and study questions at the end.

Getting an overview will help your child focus on what's important as she starts to take notes, rather than getting mired in the details.

Burke prefers to use the term "note-making" - making meaning from information - to the more passive "note-taking." Note-making, he says, is "manipulating information to make it sticky." Some students can make information "stick" by making outlines. For other more visual learners,

colors might work better. Burke gives the example of one student who went back over her science notes using red highlighter to indicate blood and blue for oxygen.

Finally, if your child is struggling, she may be having trouble reading. Ask her to explain a chapter she's read. If you can see that her comprehension is a problem, make an appointment to talk to the teacher or her counselor so you can get her the help she may need.

5. Help hone your student's budding study skills.

Studying for tests is a skill. For struggling students, it's a mystery. "Unsuccessful test takers don't know where the questions come from," says Burke. "The kids who don't succeed tend to think the others are lucky." Some tips to remember in helping your child:

- Your student can practice active learning when studying - highlighting his notes, using Post-its to mark key textbook passages, making study cards, and mapping and diagramming concepts.
- Some students focus better in the morning, others at night. Help your child find the times that his efforts will be most effective.
- Sometimes we just have to memorize. You may have used a mnemonic like Roy G. Biv to remember the colors of the rainbow (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet). Inventing your own silly mnemonic together works just as well and can lighten up a study session.

6. Meet with the teacher or teachers.

Is there one teacher in particular that your child finds difficult? If so, work on ways to smooth over the problem areas. Maybe it's understanding how the teacher gives homework or what his expectations are. Usually, an email exchange, a phone call or a visit after school will clear up misunderstandings between teacher, student and parent. A middle-school teacher can have as many as 90 to 150 students to interact with each day, and students need proactive parents to help them understand each teacher's methods.

7. If all else fails, it might be time to hire a tutor.

For articles and tips on hiring a tutor, visit our [Tutoring and Homework Help](#) section.

Laura Hendrick, a literacy coach in Santa Rosa, California, advises: "Kids may try to push you away in middle school but they still need you. Be firm; establish accountability measures. I haven't seen a case where a student didn't need parental support in middle school both academically and emotionally."

GreatSchools staff writers Lisa Rosenthal and Linda Strean contributed to this article.

Reading tips for middle-schoolers

The keys to becoming a successful reader in middle school include learning organization skills and sophisticated reading strategies. Laura Hendrick, a literacy coach in Santa Rosa, California, has these suggestions for students:

- Create an organization system at home. Keep binders neat and have a file for completed papers.
- Practice reading. Read every day and particularly during the summer - the more practice the better. It doesn't matter what genre you read, just make sure you are reading.
- Read questions at the end of each textbook chapter before reading the chapter; use headings and subheadings as cues.

In their book, *Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms*, authors Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, Christine Cziko and Lori Hurwitz advise the following for students who get confused when reading a text:

- Ignore the unclear part and read on to see if it gets clearer.
- Reread the unclear part.
- Reread the sentence(s) before the unclear part.
- Try to connect the unclear part to something you already know.

Advice for parents of middle-schoolers

High school teacher Lance Balla suggests the following:

- Understand what kind of learner your child is. Does he need silence to concentrate? Then make sure the TV is not on when he is studying. Provide an appropriate learning environment at home.
- Stay engaged with your child and her teachers. Be proactive. Don't wait until the first report card. Make sure you know what is expected of your child and that he is meeting the teacher's expectations. If you wait for the report card, it may be too late. If your school has an online grading system that you can access, make sure you log on frequently to see how your child is doing.
- Create a college-going culture at home. Emphasize that you expect your child will go to college.
- Model good reading habits. If your child sees you reading, then he will be more likely to become a reader, too.

Suzanne Owen, English teacher, literacy coach and mother of four in Antioch, California, suggests these tips:

- Subscribe to a newspaper and encourage your children to read it. Newspapers provide more detail and background than the Web or sound bites on TV. Newspapers also help make connections between what appear to be disparate bits of information.
- Talk to your kids about what they are learning; not about grades, but actual content.

