

Middle School Parent Guidebook

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“It is not what you do for your children, but what you have taught them to do for themselves that will make them successful human beings.” Ann Landers

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Work with Your School

Work with and support the teachers, counselors, and administrators at your school. Like you, they want your child to have a great middle school experience.

Show support and interest

Children's attitudes about school are, to a large extent, determined by what their parents say and do. Your child needs to know that you support the teachers and administrators at your school, and that you consider education to be a top priority.

You can best convey your interest in education and your support of your child's school by doing the following:

- ▶ Insist that your child be in school, on time, every day.
- ▶ Expect your child to work up to his/her potential.
- ▶ Show an interest in what your child is studying.
- ▶ Talk about the importance of getting a good education.
- ▶ Expect your child to follow the school rules.
- ▶ Attend all parent programs and parent-teacher conferences.
- ▶ Encourage your child to think about going to college.
- ▶ Show consistent interest in your child's academic progress.

Communicate with your school

It's much easier today for parents to stay informed and to communicate with school personnel. Schools have their own websites, and parents can usually communicate with teachers and counselors via e-mail.



Don't hesitate to ask for information or help when you need it. If there is ever a situation (e.g., health problem, divorce, death in the family) that might affect your child's attitude or performance, contact your child's counselor or principal and explain the situation.

Work with the school to resolve problems

If your child complains about a class or teacher, listen closely, and try to determine what's going on. While doing so, remember that part of your child's education is to learn how to succeed in subjects that he/she may not particularly enjoy. Also remember that it's important for students to learn how to adapt to different teachers, expectations, and teaching styles.

If there's a problem with a class, teacher, or another student, first try to help your child figure out how to deal with the situation independently. If you think the problem is serious or feel you need to intervene, contact the teacher, counselor, or principal and share your concerns.

Make the most of parent-teacher conferences

Conferences provide an excellent opportunity for parents to both give and receive information. Teachers are able to provide information on how a student is performing, and parents can share information that will help teachers better understand their child.



In some middle schools, parents meet with one teacher who represents a “team” of teachers. Some parent-teacher conferences include the student, and some are student led. Regardless of the format, conferences are very important and parents need to attend.

Before you go to a parent-teacher conference, make a list of the information you want to share, along with any questions or concerns that you may have. Also, ask your child if there's anything you should discuss with the teacher.

Sometimes it's helpful to take your child with you to the conference so that you can meet with the teacher together. This gives your child an opportunity to be a part of the discussion.

On the following page are ten parent-teacher discussion topics, along with questions to ask. Focusing on these discussion topics and questions will help ensure that your parent-teacher conferences are meaningful and productive.

Parent - Teacher Conference

Discussion Topics and Questions

- ▶ **Homework** - Is my child's homework completed thoroughly, accurately, and on time?
- ▶ **Class Participation** - Does my child ask questions, volunteer answers, and participate in discussions?
- ▶ **Organization** - Does my child seem organized? Does he/she come to class prepared?
- ▶ **Academic Success** - How is my child doing in this class? Is my child working up to his/her potential? Is this class appropriate for my child's ability level?
- ▶ **Classroom Time Management** - Does my child use class time wisely?
- ▶ **Attendance and Punctuality** - Is my child in class every day? Does he/she come to class on time?
- ▶ **Focus** - Does my child pay attention in class?
- ▶ **Social Adjustment** - Is my child respectful and courteous to teachers and classmates? Does my child appear to get along with the other students?
- ▶ **Strengths and Weaknesses** - What are my child's strengths? What does my child need to work on?
- ▶ **Additional Comments** - Do you have any advice or suggestions for me or my child? What is the best way for me to contact you if I have a question or concern in the future?



Facts and Tips

These facts and tips will help you guide and support your child through the middle school years.

Understand the many types of changes

Middle schoolers can challenge and frustrate even the most patient and caring parents, but when parents take a look at all the changes middle schoolers are going through, it's much easier to understand why they act the way they do.

► Physical

Most students change a great deal physically during middle school. Because students mature at such different rates, middle school students come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes.

When children go through puberty, they often feel self-conscious and embarrassed by the things their bodies are doing. Middle schoolers find that different parts of their bodies sometimes grow and change at different times and at different rates. A young person's arms, legs, or nose, for example, may all of a sudden seem out of proportion. Of course, this all happens at a time when students are very concerned about their appearance. With their growing bodies and emerging hormones, middle school students sometimes feel tired, achy, and just plain cranky.

Parents can help their children develop a positive self-image by reassuring them that the changes they're going through are normal, by teaching them about personal hygiene, and by helping them choose clothes that are flattering and in style.

Most importantly, parents should just keep reassuring their children that they look wonderful.



► Emotional

Middle school students are often moody. They're up, they're down, they're happy, they're sad, they're confused. These mood changes are the normal result of the changes their bodies are going through, and of their need to figure out who they are and how they fit into this complicated middle school world.

Parents can best help their children by providing encouragement, support, love, and a stable home environment.

► Intellectual

Middle schoolers are ready to explore and learn about life. They have a strong sense of what's fair, and they like to think that they can make a difference. Middle schoolers are able to think more abstractly and they can handle more complex intellectual tasks.

Parents can help their children develop intellectually by discussing serious topics with them, by giving them opportunities to express their opinions, and by showing respect for their ideas.

► Social

Friends are very important to middle schoolers and they often spend a great deal of time instant messaging, text messaging, and talking to each other on the phone. They are also beginning to take a much greater interest in the opposite sex.



Middle school students are trying to find their own identity, but yet they don't want to be different. They want to be part of the group, and they often worry about what other people think of them. Because "fitting in" is so important, middle school students are often susceptible to peer pressure and to the images and messages they get from the media (e.g., "girls should be thin").

Students with a positive self image are less influenced by peer pressure and media messages. It is, therefore, important for parents to help their children build their self-esteem and develop a strong sense of who they are. While being with friends is very important to middle schoolers, doing things with their parents and families provides them with a much needed sense of security.

Be aware and be informed

Middle school is arguably the time when parents need to be the most involved and the most vigilant. A whole new world has opened up to middle schoolers, and this is often the time when they are tempted to “try new things.” These tips will help ensure that your child stays on the right track.



- ▶ When your child leaves the house, know who he/she is going to be with, where they are going, and what they’ll be doing. When children know their parents are keeping an eye on them, they are less tempted to do things they shouldn’t.
- ▶ Talk to the parents of your child’s friends. Discuss curfews, sleepovers, and upcoming social events. Children are less likely to complain that “*Everyone else is allowed to...*” if they know their parents are talking to each other.
- ▶ Invite your child’s friends over and get to know them. Also, be available to drive them around. You will learn a lot listening to them talk.
- ▶ Know what’s going on at the mall and at other gathering places.
- ▶ Know what kinds of music your child is listening to and what videos and TV shows your child is watching. Also, know where your child is going online. Middle school students want and need a certain amount of freedom, but they still need their parents to provide guidelines and set limits.
- ▶ Alcohol, drugs, and smoking are issues that every parent has to deal with in some way. Be informed as to what’s happening in your community and at your school. Talk to your child about the dangers of alcohol, drugs, and smoking, and make sure that your child knows where you stand on these issues.
- ▶ If you have a feeling that your child is involved in an activity that is wrong or harmful, listen to your instincts, and take the appropriate action.

Communicate with your child

Communicating with middle school students can be a real challenge. When parents ask “*How was school today?*” they often hear “*fine*” “*boring*” or “*okay*.” If parents ask any more questions, middle schoolers are likely to wonder why they’re being interrogated. Communicating with middle school students can be difficult, but because it’s so important, parents need to make the extra effort.

The tips below will help you communicate and connect with your middle school child.

- ▶ Timing is important. Be available to listen when your child wants to talk. Also look for times when your child is most likely to be open to conversation (after getting home from school, before going to bed, etc.). A particularly good time to talk is when you’re driving in the car. It’s quiet, no one can go anywhere, and you’re spending the time together anyway.
- ▶ Tell your child what you want done, instead of what you don’t want done. For example, instead of saying “*Don’t leave your backpack on the floor*” say “*Please put your backpack in your room.*”
- ▶ Ask open-ended questions that require more than one word answers. Instead of “*How was school?*” say “*Tell me about your day*” or “*What’s that book about?*”
- ▶ It’s often easier to talk to your child when you’re doing something you both enjoy. Make time for one-on-one activities like cooking, shopping, taking a walk, working on a car, watching a game, or going out for ice cream. These are great ways to spend quality time with your child, and they provide excellent opportunities for conversation. Your child may not always seem thrilled to hang out with you, but whether he/she admits it or not, your child needs and wants to spend time alone with you.
- ▶ Be very specific in your communications. Instead of saying “*Be home early*” say “*Be home at 8:00.*” Don’t leave instructions open to interpretation.



- ▶ Middle schoolers often say things for shock value or to “test the waters” to see how their parents will react. In these situations, it’s best to just listen, stay calm, and to not overreact. “So, *can you tell me why you want to dye your hair green?*”
- ▶ Children sometimes respond to commands or requests in a tone of voice that’s less than pleasant. Chalk this up to middle school moodiness or rebellion. The important thing is that your child does what you say. Expecting a positive attitude is sometimes too much to ask.
- ▶ Middle schoolers may act like they don’t hear what their parents say, but they do listen.
- ▶ Don’t be afraid to apologize or to admit you were wrong. Children need to know that it’s okay to make mistakes and that it’s okay to be wrong. Children also need to learn that it’s important to take responsibility for your actions, and to correct your mistakes whenever possible.
- ▶ Recognize the importance of nonverbal communication. Children aren’t always able to put into words the things they want or need you to know. It is, therefore, important to pay attention to body language, moods, eating habits, sleeping patterns, and school performance. These can be good indicators of how things are going at school and with friends.
- ▶ If middle schoolers seem down or upset, often a hug or a few words of encouragement are all they need. If you sense that there’s a serious issue that needs to be addressed, let your child know that you’re concerned. If you need help, talk to your child’s counselor or physician.
- ▶ There are certain “unwritten rules” that middle schoolers hope their parents will respect. For example, parents shouldn’t show their children affection or correct them in front of their friends, and when parents are driving a group of kids, they should speak as little as possible. Actually, all of these rules boil down to one rule: Don’t say or do anything that will embarrass your child.

