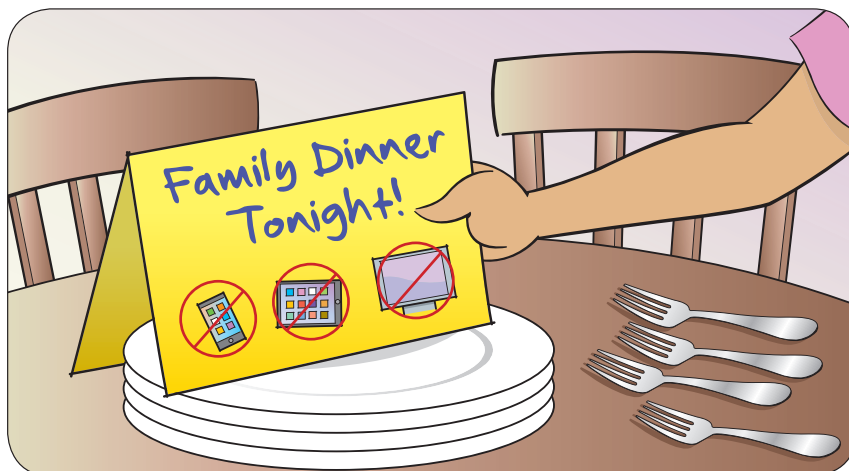


Middle School Parents[®]

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Essex Regional Educational Services
Commission Title I Program

still make the difference!



Research shows what middle schoolers need for dinner

What does your middle schooler really want for dinner? *You*. Families live hectic lives and you may wonder whether gathering for a family meal is worth all the hassle. In fact, family meals make a huge difference.

Studies have found that kids who eat dinner with their families four or more nights a week are less likely to try cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana. They are also twice as likely to get all A's.

Here's how to make family meals work for you:

- **Don't beat yourself up** if you can't eat together every night. Try to have dinner together a few times each week.
- **Include your child** in your meal-time conversations. Ask specific

questions. Instead of the standard "How was your day?" be specific. Ask, "What's one interesting thing that happened at school?" It may get him to open up more.

- **Keep it pleasant.** Don't argue with your child during dinner.
- **Laugh.** Humor makes dinnertime fun for everyone.
- **Be flexible.** If evening meals are hard to schedule, share breakfast with your child. You'll have the same chance to connect.
- **Go low-tech.** Don't try to compete with electronics for your child's attention. You'll lose. Turn off the TV and keep cell phones away from the table.

Source: "The Importance of Family Dinners VIII," The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, nswc.com/mid_dinner.

After-school schedules can affect academics



If your busy child's after-school activities are hurting her in-school performance, it's time to free up

her calendar. When kids complain about not having enough time to finish homework, be with the family or to just hang out, they are overscheduled.

To help your child thin out her after-school schedule:

- **Set some basic rules.** If she plays more than one sport, for example, consider enforcing a "one sport at a time" rule.
- **Understand the commitment.** Before your child signs up for any activity, make sure she knows exactly what will be expected of her. If the drama club requires three rehearsals each week, that might be too much for her schedule.
- **Prioritize.** It's great that your child loves playing the clarinet as much as she enjoys karate and babysitting. But if they leave her with little time to study, something's got to give. Ask her to think about which activity is most important to her and to consider taking a break from the others.

How to react when your child's grades are less than perfect



It's natural to be upset if your child brings home a bad report card. But showing your frustration and anger won't help him earn better grades. A better approach is to:

- **Put grades in perspective.** Poor grades can drain your child's confidence. Make sure he knows that grades are important, but that they are *not* a measure of his worth.
- **Accent the positive.** Talk about what your child has done well—in an academic subject or an extracurricular activity. Ask him what he is most proud of.
- **Look behind the grade.** Low grades indicate a problem. Ask your child what he thinks the

problem is. Sometimes it's not academic ability, but poor study habits or test anxiety.

- **Set realistic goals** for improvement. Don't expect all A's if your child is currently getting all C's.
- **Contact teachers.** Sometimes kids try their best and still fail. Or they blame teachers for their troubles. Gather more information by asking teachers for their view of what's happening.

"When children and parents talk regularly about school, children perform better academically."

—National Education Association

Start your child thinking about a possible career for the future



All parents want their children to grow up and have satisfying work that suits their skills and interests.

Here are some things you can do to help your middle schooler prepare for a choice career:

- **Encourage her to explore** her interests through extracurricular activities, such as school clubs and volunteering.
- **Talk with her** about your own job experiences. Try to arrange a time your child can shadow you in your job. Or have her shadow a friend or relative.
- **Have her take self-assessments** that will reveal her strengths, interests and possible career matches. You can find some online and you can also ask the school counselor.
- **Model positive work habits**, including promptness, respect and responsibility.
- **Check out helpful resources.** Go online to help your child learn specifics of jobs that interest her, such as educational requirements, skills needed and salaries.
- **Research educational options.** Look into different choices—like technical schools and two- and four-year colleges. What does your child need to do to reach her career goals?
- **Talk about money.** Calculate the cost of basic living expenses, such as rent, food and clothes. Compare this amount to the average salaries of jobs that interest your child.

Are you helping address negative peer pressure?



Peer influence is strong in the middle school years. Are you doing all you can to help your child combat negative peer pressure? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

1. **Have you talked** with your child about doing the *right* thing rather than the *easy* thing?
2. **Do you suggest** ways your child can say *no* to things she knows are wrong? She could say, "I'm not interested," and walk away.
3. **Do you talk** to your child about the desire to fit in?
4. **Do you make** your family rules clear to your child? Do you emphasize that she can talk to you when she feels pressured to break them?
5. **Do you encourage** your child to think about consequences? "If you skip school with your friends, what might happen as a result?"

How well are you doing?

If most of your answers were *yes*, you are helping your child resist negative peer pressure. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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Talk with your child about making important decisions



Now that he's older, your middle schooler will be making more decisions on his own. And those decisions can have big consequences—for his education and for his life.

Although you ultimately can't make your child's choices for him, there are some important topics to discuss now so that he'll be able to make smart decisions about them later. These include:

- **Decisions about school.** How does your child feel about school? Does he take his work seriously? Or does he slack off and do the bare minimum to get by?
- **Decisions about friends.** What kinds of kids does your child hang out with? Are they decent people? Does your child feel comfortable

inviting friends to his home? Why or why not?

- **Decisions about you.** Does your child feel that he can always come to you with problems? In his mind, are you an ally or an enemy?
- **Decisions about drinking and drugs.** Have you given him the facts about drugs, alcohol and smoking? Does he understand what he risks by experimenting with these substances?
- **Decisions about his self-worth.** Does your child believe that he matters? Does he know that you love him? How much he values himself will have a huge impact on the decisions—big or small—he makes for years to come.

Source: S. Covey, *The 6 Most Important Decisions You'll Ever Make: A Guide for Teens*, Touchstone.

Community service improves school performance, self-esteem



Studies show that kids who participate in community service have better grades and more interest in school than those who don't.

A child who participates in community service also has strong positive feelings about herself and her place in society. By volunteering, your child will:

- **Be less likely** to take negative risks, such as doing drugs.
- **Have higher self-esteem**, be more responsible and feel more connected to her community.
- **Have stronger social skills.**
- **Be more likely to stay in school.** Volunteers tend to have regular attendance and perform well.

- **Learn valuable skills.** These can include how to deal with different kinds of people. Or she might learn how to write a strong letter or how to organize a group. These skills will help her in school and for the rest of her life.
- **Meet people**, such as the heads of agencies or businesses. They can be references for her in the future.

If your child is not sure how to go about getting involved, here are some places to get information:

- **The school guidance office.**
- **Local libraries.**
- **Religious organizations.**
- **Community service groups.**

Source: Child Trends Data Bank, *Volunteering*, niscw.com/mid_service.

Q: My son hates to write. When he has a writing assignment, he just stares at the blank piece of paper. Is there anything I can do to help?

Questions & Answers

A: Middle schoolers are often reluctant writers. Many simply freeze with fear at the thought of writing. They worry that what they write won't be any good, or that they'll be made fun of.

To help your middle schooler overcome writer's block:

- **Remind him** that professional writers have difficulty writing sometimes, too.
- **Talk through ideas** with him. Encourage your child to brainstorm and make a list of as many ideas as he can.
- **Suggest he write** ideas as they come. Later he can edit flow, grammar and spelling.
- **Encourage him** to use a computer to write if possible. This makes it easier to make revisions.
- **Have him try freewriting.** He should write anything that comes to mind, no matter how silly. Or ask your child to write about something he enjoys.
- **Don't over-criticize.** If he asks you to review his writing, note what you like first. Focus on what your child is trying to say, not just the mechanics of writing.
- **Don't fix his mistakes** for him. This won't boost his self-confidence. Instead, it will send the message that you don't think your child is capable of fixing them himself.
- **Be patient.** Allow him to express his frustration. It takes time to become a good writer.

It Matters: Homework

Learn about the four types of homework



While doing her math homework, your child says, “Why do I have to do the same kinds of problems over and over? I’m tired of them!”

It’s true that teachers sometimes assign repetitive homework, and it’s helpful for parents to know why. Here are the four kinds of assignments—and the reasons teachers use them:

1. **Practice homework.** Doing the same kind of work repeatedly helps students remember a skill. This is especially true when it comes to learning math, word definitions and spelling.
2. **Preparation homework.** This is a way to introduce kids to new topics. For instance, middle schoolers might read a book about animals before studying animal families.
3. **Extension homework.** Students need to be able to connect separate topics. For example, they might be asked to compare and contrast two historic events.
4. **Creative homework.** Teachers like to challenge students to use different skills to show what they’ve learned. For instance, your child might be asked to build a model for science class.

Of course, all homework builds self-discipline. So remind your child that even if she doesn’t see a reason for an assignment, she still must do it.

Source: M. Martin and C. Waltman-Greenwood, *Solve Your Child’s School-Related Problems*, HarperCollins.

Use strategies to boost your middle schooler’s memory skills

Help your middle schooler remember what he studies! To boost his memory skills:

- **Be sure he understands** what he’s studying. It’s tough to memorize something if you don’t know what it means in the first place.
- **Set it to music.** Encourage your child to make up a tune or simple rhyme to remember names, dates or math formulas.
- **Surround him** with the material. Is he studying a certain history topic? Find books, movies and songs about that topic, too.
- **Try visualization.** Get your child to associate the thing he’s trying to memorize with a mental image. Have him close his eyes and picture what he is studying. A picture really is worth a thousand words.



- **Make it personal.** Ask your child to explain the topic he’s studying to you. Just putting it into his own words may help the concepts stick in his mind.
- **Be thorough.** Remind your child to read through all of his notes when he’s studying. Afterward, he can go back and reread the parts he’s struggling to recall.

How to help your child with homework without taking over



It’s frustrating to watch kids struggle with homework. Some parents find it so difficult that they actually do assignments for them. But homework is their children’s responsibility.

There are ways, however, that parents can *help* with homework:

- **Help study.** Call out vocabulary words to your child or use flash cards with her.
- **Help plan.** Teach your child to divide large projects into small

parts. If a report is due in three weeks, she’ll have to do research, make an outline, write a rough draft and do revisions.

- **Help organize.** Encourage your child to use calendars, assignment notebooks, folders and other organizers.
- **Help clarify.** If you understand an assignment your child is confused about, discuss it with her. Help her with sample problems. If the assignment confuses you too, have your child review it with her teacher.