

Middle Years

Working Together for School Success



Short Stops

Getting the message

Let your tween know you're counting on her to keep you in the loop about school news. During morning announcements, she might jot down reminders ("Ask for a ride to basketball tryouts, Saturday 9 a.m."). Or have her post flyers on the refrigerator where you'll see them.

Mealtime manners

Encourage your child to be polite when he's offered food. If he doesn't like something, he could take a small portion to try — maybe he'll enjoy it after all! If he has a food allergy or eats a vegetarian diet, he can mention it and say, "Thank you anyway."

Turning in assignments

Your middle grader's homework isn't finished until she hands it in. Suggest that she take it out of her backpack as soon as she sits down in each class so it's ready to be collected. Or perhaps she'll keep homework in one folder to carry to every class so she doesn't leave any assignments in her locker.

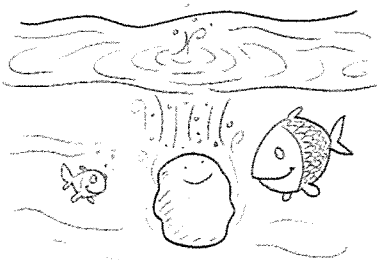
Worth quoting

"Happiness often sneaks in through a door you didn't know you left open."
John Barrymore

Just for fun

Q: If you throw a blue rock into the Red Sea, what will it become?

A: Wet!



Growing responsibility

Picture your middle grader as a responsible young adult. How do you help him get there? Consider these ideas for planting the seeds of responsibility now so he'll grow into the dependable person you're trying to raise.

Promote consistency

Sticking to routines makes handling responsibilities a natural part of your tween's day. For instance, if he needs a tablet for school, he might charge it on the kitchen counter every night. Or suggest that he bring his PE uniform home on Fridays so he can wash it.

Pass the "baton"

Imagine you're in a relay race and you're passing the "responsibility baton" to your child. Make the handoff by switching from giving instructions to asking questions. Say he's getting ready for a chorus concert. Instead of telling

him to put on his dress shoes and find his sheet music, try saying, "What do you need to do to get ready?"

Discuss accountability

Experience is an excellent teacher — and it can make your middle grader more responsible. Share an example from your own life ("I forgot about my doctor's appointment, so now I have to pay a no-show fee"). Then, explain what you learned ("I need to put appointments on my calendar right away").



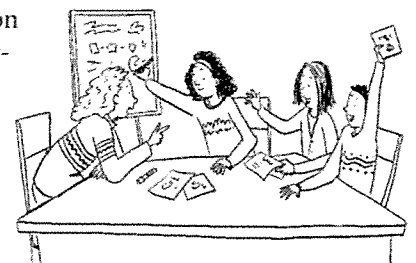
Brainstorm for project success

Your tween may have heard the expression "Two heads are better than one." That's especially true when it comes to brainstorming! Share these tips she can use the next time she works on a group project.

■ **Get organized.** Decide what the group will accomplish (say, picking a topic for a class presentation). Review the assignment guidelines, and appoint one person to record ideas.

■ **Consider all possibilities.** Encourage your middle grader to call out any idea that comes to mind, even if she's not sure it'll work. An off-topic or half-formed suggestion may lead others to think of ideas that *will* work.

■ **Read and evaluate.** At the end of the brainstorming session, look over all the contributions. Think of ways to combine or tweak everyone's favorites.



Writing is fun!

Motivate your tween to write more often with these activities. She'll practice using parts of speech and descriptive language.

Make up Mad Libs. Your middle grader could create a silly story by leaving blanks for you to fill in. Encourage her to think carefully about where to put blanks and label each with the part of speech needed (noun, verb, adjective). For example, will



she leave out a noun so you can choose the character? ("I looked up to see a giant _____ walking down the street.") Or will she pick the character and let you supply an adjective to describe it? ("There was a _____ wildebeest on the loose.")

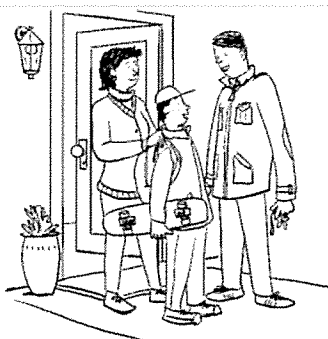
Write shape poetry. Can your

child write a poem in the shape of her topic? With *concrete poetry*, she'll do just that. First, have her select an object to write about, such as an apple, and think about what it brings

to mind (baking apple pies with Grandma, visiting an apple orchard). She should draw an outline of an apple in pencil, write lines of poetry in pen to fit the shape, and erase the outline. 👍

Parent to Parent Peaceful co-parenting

After our divorce, my ex-wife and I used a co-parenting app to communicate because talking in person was awkward.



When I mentioned the app to my counselor, he suggested that it would be good for our son, Aiden, to see his parents getting along—in person.

I realized he was right, so lately I've started going to my ex-wife's door to pick up Aiden rather than waiting in the car. I caught my son smiling when he saw me talking to his mother about how he's doing in school and about our plans for the weekend.

We still use the app, but it's getting easier to set aside our emotions for Aiden's sake. He's realizing that we can work together even though we have our differences. 👍

Q & A

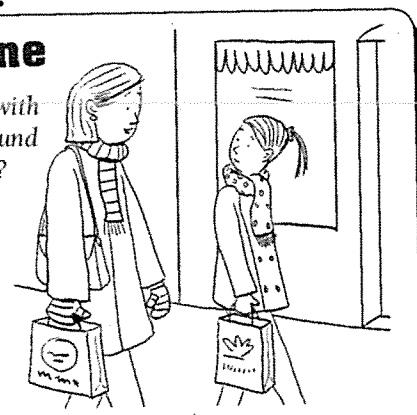
Avoid the gossip scene

Q I recently heard my daughter talking with her friends about a rumor that's going around at school. How can I encourage her not to gossip?

A First, talk to your daughter when her friends aren't around. You could suggest that she always assume rumors are false. Point out that people who start or share them often don't even know if they're true. They may gossip because they want attention or to get revenge, for example.

Then, have your tween think about how the person being talked about would feel if he overheard the gossip. Instead of staying silent, your middle grader might speak up and say, "That sounds like a rumor." She should also avoid spreading the rumor.

Finally, explain that sharing rumors can cause friends not to trust her. After all, if they know she's willing to gossip, they may wonder if she'll gossip about them one day, too. 👍



Creative tweens

Ever wonder what happened to your singing, doodling, spontaneous child? He's still there! Since middle graders are usually more self-conscious, they might need a little coaxing to express their creativity. Try these strategies.

1. Put an inexpensive art easel and supplies (drawing paper, paints, brushes, markers, colored pencils) in a corner of your home. When you're not looking, your tween may

decide to sketch a pet, paint a sunset, or try his hand at abstract art.

2. Put your middle grader in charge of making signs on the computer or on poster board for family members' birthdays. He can download pictures specific to the person (favorite food or movie star) and write a clever greeting. *Example:* "Happy birthday from the whole bunch" with a picture of bananas. 👍



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Resources for Educators, a division of CCH Incorporated
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 800-394-5052 • rfeustomer@wolterskluwer.com
 www.rfeonline.com
 ISSN 1540-5540

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Short Stops

Thinking of you

It's comforting for children to know their parents care about the ins and outs of their daily lives. Try leaving a short, unexpected note where your middle grader will find it. Or send an email or text to show interest. ("Good luck on your math test tomorrow" or "Have a great Tuesday!")

Too good to be true?

Advertisements often promise more than companies can deliver. Ask your tween to read the fine print carefully. What does she find out? She'll sharpen her critical thinking and reading comprehension skills as she evaluates the promises and the exceptions. Plus, she'll learn consumer smarts!

Homegrown cooperation

When you need to do a big job around the house like reorganizing the attic or scrubbing the baseboards, have everyone pitch in. It will teach your child to cooperate and help him see the benefits of working together, such as getting more done in less time. *Idea:* Plan a fun activity to celebrate your accomplishment.

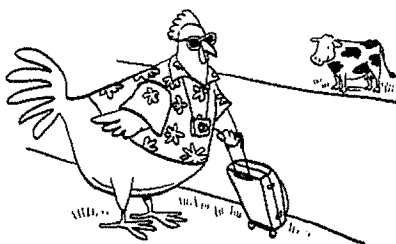
Worth quoting

"It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters." *Epictetus*

Just for fun

Q: Why did the cow cross the road?

A: Because the chicken was on vacation!

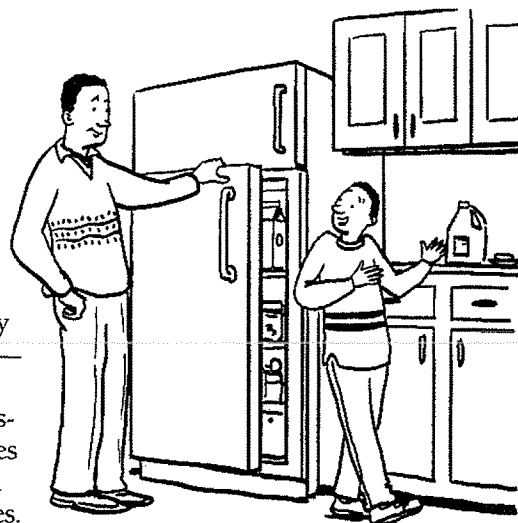


My actions, my responsibility

For your tween to take personal responsibility, it's important that he own up to his actions and keep his commitments. Help him learn this valuable lesson with these tips for handling common excuses.

Admit mistakes

It's typical for kids this age to immediately deny wrongdoing. ("Who left the refrigerator open?" "Not me!") They do so to keep from getting into trouble—and to protect their pride. Your middle grader will be more willing to admit mistakes if you don't overreact when he does confess. Instead, use a neutral tone, and give a gentle reminder for minor offenses. ("Let's all try to keep the door closed.")



Avoid excuses

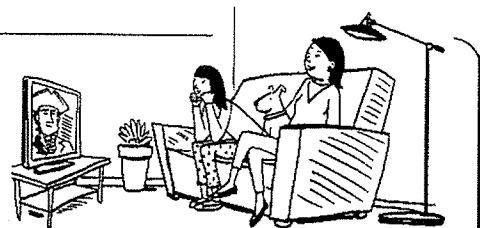
Does your tween have an excuse for everything? Maybe he didn't get a permission slip signed and says, "You weren't home when I had it out." Make it clear it's his responsibility to find a way to get things done. Discuss what he could have done, such as leaving the paper on the kitchen counter with a note or putting a reminder in his planner to get it signed.

Accept blame

If your child is in the hot seat, he may be tempted to blame others. Maybe he didn't do well on a test, and he says his friend kept goofing off during study time. Explain that blaming others doesn't solve the problem—and that preparing for the test was up to him, not anyone else. Brainstorm what he can do next time (study alone, use a checklist to stay on track). 👍

That's history

History class involves a lot of names, places, dates, and events. Share these ideas to help your child understand—and remember—the information she is learning.



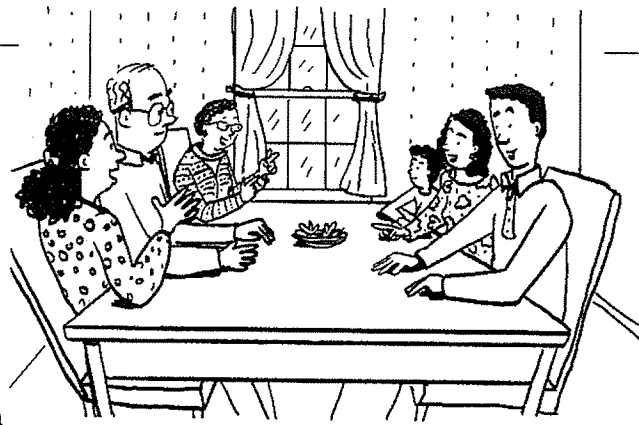
■ **Compare and contrast.** To quickly tell the differences between two documents, events, or historical figures, she could draw a line down a sheet of paper. She might describe the Declaration of Independence on one side and the Constitution on the other.

■ **Watch documentaries.** Encourage your middle grader to look for films related to topics she's studying, like the Gold Rush or the abolitionist movement. They will provide background that helps her understand the events better. *Tip:* Watch the documentaries together—you'll both learn, and they'll give you something to talk about. 👍

Great discussions

Family gatherings are a fun time to practice the art of conversation—a skill your middle grader needs for classroom discussions, after-school activities, or just hanging with friends. Here are two activities to try.

Talk in a “fishbowl.” This strategy can teach your child what does and doesn’t work in discussions. Pick something to address, such as a news article or an idea for a new business. Divide into two groups, and let one group talk while the other watches.



The observers could jot down what’s helping the conversation (clarifying what someone else said) or hurting it (muttering under your breath). Then, switch roles.

Take a side. Help your tween learn to give her opinions constructively. Choose a hot topic. (“Athletes should make less money.”) Those who agree should sit on one side of a table, and those who disagree on the other. Debate with the person sitting opposite you for a few minutes. Next, the people on one side move down one chair. Start again. Repeat until all pairs have debated. 👍

Create recycled art

Turning old objects into artwork will stretch your child’s creativity and give him practice seeing things in new ways. Suggest that he use these everyday items for do-it-yourself projects.



CDs and DVDs

Let your tween make a “reflective mosaic” by cutting old CDs and DVDs into pieces of varying shapes and sizes. (Note: He should use regular scissors, wear goggles, and watch for sharp edges when handling the pieces.) He could arrange and glue the pieces to cardboard or a canvas for hanging. Or he might make gifts by decorating small boxes or picture frames with the mirrored pieces.



Parent to Parent

Put conferences on the calendar

When my daughter Marissa started middle school, I didn’t attend her parent-teacher conference because, as far as I knew, she wasn’t having any trouble. But as the year went on, I felt a little in the dark about her classes, and it was hard for me to recognize her teachers at school events.

So last year, I decided to go. Before the conference, I asked Marissa what she wanted me to discuss. She mentioned a science event where she could volunteer for extra credit, so I got more information from her teacher. Also, hearing about her work made it easier for me to discuss it with her—and I enjoyed seeing the classrooms where Marissa spends her days.

I’ve already signed up for a time slot this year, and I’m looking forward to attending! 👍



Magazines

Have your middle schooler cut out text and pictures in black, white, and shades of gray. Now he can combine them into his own design. He’ll learn about *value*—the lightness or darkness of a color—as he decides where to place the different pieces. Or he could cut out one photo from a magazine, glue it to a blank page, and draw a background or scene around it to create a whole new piece. 👍

Q & A

Risky business

Q Now that my son is in middle school, I’m worried he may be introduced to drugs or alcohol. How can I convince him to stay away from them?

A Tell your child why he isn’t allowed to try drugs or alcohol. Not only is using them illegal at his age, but they are especially harmful to growing tweens.

Because the adolescent brain is still developing, it’s easier for addictions to take hold. And with repeated use, these substances can

cause permanent damage to his brain, affecting his memory and attention span.

Teens naturally want to take risks, so encourage your son to choose only healthy ones. He might push himself to do something outside his comfort zone, such as entering a writing contest or trying out for a new sport. Also, getting involved in after-school activities will give him a rewarding way to spend his time. 👍



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Starting over

When you and your child have a disagreement, a friendly greeting the next day can help erase bad feelings. Try sending her off to school with a hug or a warm wish ("Good luck with your speech!"). Chances are, you'll both feel better all day.

Ready, set, study

Encourage your middle grader to choose a time to start and stop his studies each day. Students who plan homework time with a beginning and an end (say, 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.) often do a better job staying on task. Your child will accomplish more and learn to pace himself.

Waiting wisely

Learning to wait for what you want is part of growing up. One way you can help your middle schooler is to teach her to distract herself. For example, if she wants to grab a snack just before dinner, suggest that she concentrate on something else, like reading a magazine.

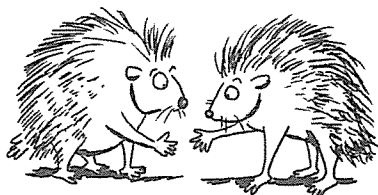
Worth quoting

"I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving."
Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.

Just for fun

Q: What do porcupines say after they shake hands?

A: "Ouch!"



Taking the reins

Your middle grader is blossoming into the adult she'll one day become. By taking charge of more parts of her life, she'll gain confidence and learn to stand on her own. Here are three areas where she can take more responsibility.

1. Communicate with teachers

Encourage your child to check in with teachers from time to time to see how she's doing in each class. She can ask the teacher in advance for a couple minutes of her time or stop in before or after school. The teacher may have suggestions for ways she can challenge herself (join the science club) or things she can do to be more involved in class (take part in classroom discussions).

2. Set goals

Your child has the exciting responsibility of deciding what she wants to achieve. From making the lacrosse team to starting her own business, she is in charge of finding out what she needs to do to meet her goal. For example, she can ask the



lacrosse coach when tryouts are and make time to practice. Or she can take pet-care classes and create flyers to advertise her pet-sitting service.

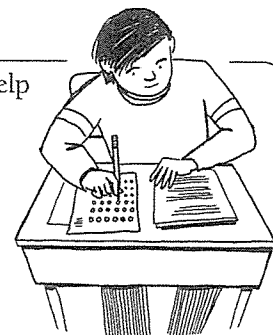
3. Handle friendships

Say your middle grader has been invited to two different friends' homes the same night or has a friend who has been "annoying" her lately. Rather than telling your child what she should do, ask questions to guide her so she can find her own solutions. *Examples:* "What are your options?" "Why do you think she's acting that way?" 👍

Standardized tests? No sweat!

For many students, spring brings standardized tests. Help your child prepare with these suggestions:

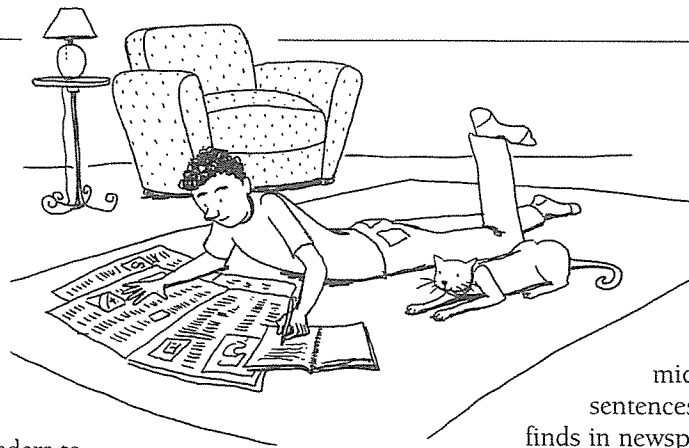
- Participate actively during review sessions, and take practice tests. Your middle grader will find out what subjects will be covered and practice answering different types of questions (short answer, essay).
- Put the test in perspective. It's a chance for your child to show what he has learned and how well the school is doing. Explain that you want him to do his best, but it's only one piece of his performance.
- Read all instructions before starting. He should ask about anything he doesn't understand so he'll know exactly what to do.
- Use test-taking strategies. *Example:* solving multiple-choice math problems before looking at the possible answers. 👍



Secrets of strong writing

When putting pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), following a few basic rules of good writing can make your middle grader's work clear, concise, and accurate. Share these guidelines.

Be clear. The point of writing is for readers to understand what the author is trying to say. When your child can choose between words with similar definitions ("brighten" vs. "irradiate"), encourage him to use the most specific one.



Tip: Suggest that he check a thesaurus and dictionary for options and meanings.

Be concise. Effective writing uses fewer words rather than more.

For practice, challenge your middle grader to shorten long sentences you make up or that he finds in newspapers or books. Have him read them aloud so he can hear the difference.

The shorter ones should get to the point more quickly.

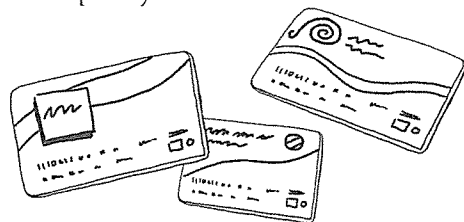
Be accurate. Your child needs to be sure his facts are correct. Encourage him to reread his writing and pick out details that he should confirm, such as statistics, quotes, or proper names. 👍



Q & A Paying for credit

Q When I recently told my son I couldn't afford to buy him something, he suggested that I use a credit card. How can I teach him that credit isn't "free" money?

A Credit cards can seem like unlimited cash to children. Help your son understand how credit really works. Explain that, although it's a convenient way to pay for something, it's a loan you must repay—often with an extra amount (interest). Point out that you shouldn't charge more than you can afford to pay back quickly.



You might also give your son a chance to practice using credit. When he wants something within reason (say, a used video game), offer to loan him the money at 10 percent interest. If he borrows \$15, for example, he'll pay back \$16.50—and he'll learn that credit comes with a cost. 👍

Active fun

Being together and being healthy can go hand in hand. Stay connected and keep moving with these ideas for family fun:

- "Walk" across America. Post a map of the United States on the wall or refrigerator. Choose a route for your family to "walk" (North to South, East to West, for example). Every time you walk (in your neighborhood, on a nature trail, around a track), color in a state. When you've colored all the states, celebrate with a trip to a bowling alley or skating rink. Then, pick another route to walk.
- Combine golf and baseball. Lay out four hula hoops for bases, and have each player mark a softball or small plastic ball with her initials. Take turns standing in the home circle, tossing a ball in the air, and trying to hit it with a bat into the first-base circle. If a player makes it, on her next turn she tries to hit from first base to second base, and so on, until she reaches home. If she misses, she tries to hit it from where it landed to the next base. The player who reaches home with the fewest hits wins. 👍



Parent to Parent Dropout warning signs

My daughter Theresa was failing math and English and misbehaving at school. I called a friend whose son had dropped out in junior year. She said that looking back, she missed some early warning signs and wishes she had stepped in sooner.

So I made an appointment with the school counselor, and he asked me to bring Theresa along. He started by telling my daughter that he felt she wasn't doing her best. She said she knew she had messed up, but she just felt overwhelmed.

He explained that the school would work with her to help her get back on track—but she had to do her part.

With Theresa's teachers, we developed a plan for her to turn in missing work and get after-school tutoring. The counselor also assigned a peer mentor for her to touch base with daily.

It hasn't been easy, but Theresa is slowly turning things around. Her behavior has gotten better and her grades are improving. 👍



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