

Middle Years

Working together for school success

Short Stops



Year-end planning

The last months of the school year bring special events—band concerts, playoff games, geography bees, school dances. Have your child update the family calendar so everyone can see when these events take place. That way, you can plan transportation and time off from work as needed.

Say a kind word

Put-downs and insults are unfortunately common among middle graders and their friends. Encourage your youngster to do her part to set a positive tone. Instead of saying she doesn't like a classmate's shirt, for example, she could point out what she *does* like (her earrings or the fact that she's helpful).

Warm-weather learning

As it gets warmer, ask your child to think about what he enjoys doing outside (canoeing, amusement-park rides). Then, suggest that he check out the science behind those activities. He might look up key words online ("canoe science," "roller-coaster science") and find out about hydrodynamics or centripetal force—concepts that can help him in science class.

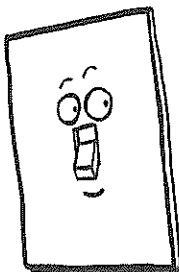
Worth quoting

"A thousand words will not leave so deep an impression as one deed."
Henrik Ibsen

Just for fun

Q: When I point up, it's bright.
When I point down, it's dark.
What am I?

A: A light switch!



Working in a group

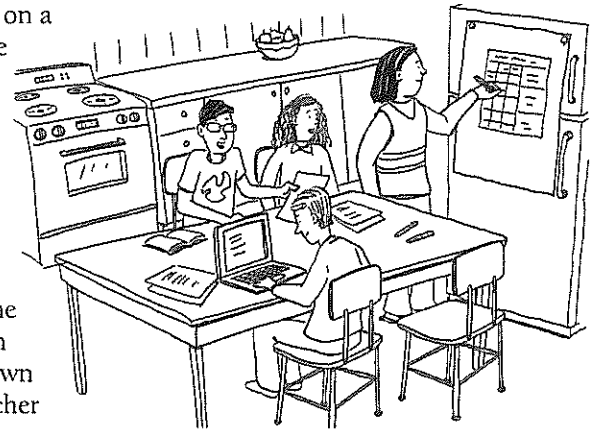
Working with other students on a project can be an exciting change from the ordinary. It allows your middle schooler to use social skills and to collaborate with others. Share these tips for launching a successful group project.

Pinpoint the topic

Start with brainstorming. At the first meeting, group members can throw out ideas for narrowing down the topic. For example, if the teacher assigns a project on the Civil War, a group might explore the causes of the war or zero in on a specific battle. After listing all the possibilities, each person could pick the option he likes best and give his reasons. Then, the group can vote.

Find a format

Projects can take many forms, from journals and travel brochures to comic strips and board games. This is the time to be creative. Group members should think about whether their project aims to inform, persuade, or show how to do something. Then, they can come up with several presentation ideas. Have members



list the pros and cons of each and pick the one that best suits the project.

Divide duties

Group members should list the tasks that need to be completed and choose their jobs (create an outline, research various sections, write each part). They can check the assignment sheet for interim and final due dates and allot a certain number of days for each task. *Note:* Consider selecting a point person to keep track of the progress, compile everyone's work into one file, and submit the project. 👍

Down to earth

Earth Day is April 22. Here are ways your child can pitch in and help the planet on this special day—and every day:

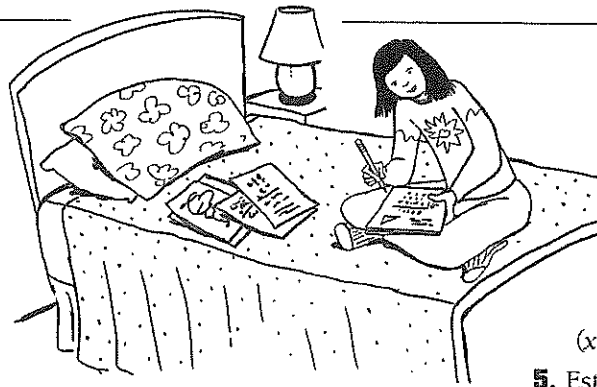
- Suggest that she pick up trash after school or community events—even if she didn't make the mess. When her friends see her doing it, they just might help, too.
- When you're shopping together, have your middle grader look for products with earth-friendly packaging. She can check package labels to see if they're made from recycled products or can be recycled.
- Let her bike or walk to school or friends' houses when possible. Driving less means less air pollution.
- Your child could join a recycling club at school. Or she might check with your city or county government about helping with Earth Day fairs or computer-recycling collections. 👍



Word has it...

What's the problem with math word problems? No problem at all—if your middle grader understands how to go about solving them! Here are step-by-step directions that can help:

1. Read the whole problem. What question is it asking? If there is more than one question, focus on one at a time.
2. Underline or highlight key words that tell what you need to do to solve the problem. Cross out words that don't matter.
3. Draw sketches or diagrams to show the problem. That way, you can visualize what is known and what you need to find out.
4. Convert words to math, and write the equation you need to solve it. Plug in symbols for operations (“-” for “how many less”). Put in variables (x, y) for unknowns, and label them so you know what they represent (x inches, y apples).
5. Estimate the answer. That will help you see if your final answer makes sense.
6. Solve the problem.
7. Check your work. You might do the problem backward, starting with the answer, to see if you get back to the original equation.
8. Write the final answer with the correct unit of measurement (volume, distance). 👍



Parent to Parent

Back to the library

I used to take my son A. J. to the library regularly when he was younger. But in middle school, the library seemed to slip off our radar screen, and I realized he wasn't reading as much. I thought a trip there might remind him how much he used to enjoy it.

On the way home from soccer practice, I said I wanted to stop at the library for a book. A. J. wandered over to the teen area and started browsing. He found a book that caught his interest and decided to take it home. On the way out, we stopped at the information desk and asked about services for middle graders. My son was happy to hear that he could sign up for free computer classes or after-school tutoring.

I think our trip made an impression on A. J. This week when I had a book to return, he asked if he could go along. 👍



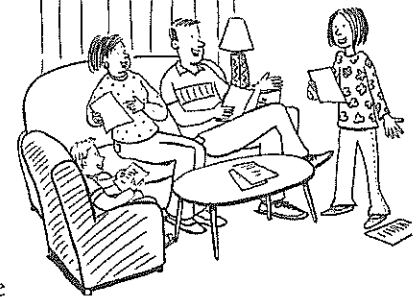
Q & A Meeting time

Q My sister-in-law holds weekly family meetings with her teenagers. How can I start something like that at my house?

A Bring up the idea with your family, and explain that family meetings can help you strengthen relationships, solve problems, and make plans. Together, agree on a day and time that's convenient for everyone. You might also decide to take turns running the meetings.

Suggest that the “leader” make an agenda by asking family members beforehand for suggestions. *Examples:* how to share the computer fairly, what to do on Saturday.

During the meeting, the leader can go through the agenda items and give everyone time to talk. At the end, you might have a special snack or play a game. Finishing on a fun note will help your family enjoy each other's company. 👍



Keep your child drug-free

Research proves it: Parents play a powerful role in helping children steer clear of drugs and alcohol. Try these strategies to send important anti-drug messages to your child.

Get informed. Find out about substances children abuse, from cough medicine and inhalants to “club drugs” like Ecstasy. For information, call the National Institute on Drug Abuse (877-643-2644), or check online (try www.adolescent-substance-abuse.com).

Review the risks. Point out the consequences of drug

and alcohol use, including impaired judgment, brain damage, and even death by accidental overdose. Explain that using drugs or alcohol can cost your child academically—he could be suspended from school. It can also hurt his reputation with friends.

Set “no use” rules. Create a clear policy against drug and alcohol use.

Young people say a major reason they avoid drinking or drug use is fear of upsetting their parents. Firm rules give your middle grader an important reason to say no. 👍



OUR PURPOSE

To provide busy parents with practical ideas that promote school success, parent involvement, and more effective parenting.

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Short Stops

Take five

Spending just five minutes a day talking to your tween can help you stay connected. After work or before bedtime, try starting a conversation by sharing information about your own day. Then, pause and wait quietly for a moment—your child is likely to share something about hers.

Staying in school

Habits that lead to dropping out of high school often begin in the middle grades, which means parents can help by stepping in early. If your youngster skips classes, is failing math or English, or often gets in trouble, talk to his school counselor. Working together to come up with a plan can help make sure your child graduates.

Illustrated notes

Your middle schooler has probably heard the phrase “A picture is worth a thousand words.” It’s good advice that she can apply to note-taking. Suggest that she occasionally draw sketches while her teacher talks. She can include more detail in a shorter amount of time, and seeing a drawing may help her remember the information more easily.

Worth quoting

“Never mistake motion for action.”
Ernest Hemingway

Just for fun

Q: What breaks when you talk?

A: Silence!



Working in a group

From slide shows to skits, group projects are often a big part of middle school. Doing assignments with classmates can teach your tween about teamwork and prepare him to work with colleagues when he grows up. Share these tips.

Build on ideas. The best ideas are often those that people come up with together. Explain to your child that when his group is choosing a topic or format for a project, it’s good to suggest as many ideas as possible. One person might take part of a classmate’s idea and tweak it or add to it. For instance, they can’t interview world leaders, but they may be able to talk to a local historian who is an expert on their subject.

Use talents. Group members should consider each other’s strengths and interests when dividing up the work. Your middle schooler can ask them to discuss what they’re good at and what they like to do. For instance, a student newspaper



reporter could interview someone, while a child who loves art might create graphics for a slide show.

Stay “professional.” Tweens tend to have drama in their social lives. Group meetings will be more productive—and the project will probably turn out better—if they avoid discussing outside conflicts. If a work-related problem crops up (say, one member isn’t pulling his weight), they can address it professionally by using a sentence that starts with “I.” *Example:* “I feel like some people are doing more than others. Let’s review our jobs.” 👍

Family time with tweens

With a little creativity, you can find winter activities that your middle grader will enjoy doing with you. Build family bonds with these suggestions:

- Have an indoor “cookout.” Ask your child to put together a playlist of beach music and come up with a menu of traditional summer foods (hot dogs, macaroni salad). She could also plan an activity such as a beanbag-toss tournament or hula-hoop contest.

- Take a hike. Let your youngster select a park or trail that she finds interesting. It might have historical significance or be in a wildlife preservation area, for example. Pack thermoses of hot chocolate, and have her play tour guide. She can tell you why she chose that spot and point out landmarks or animals as you hike. 👍

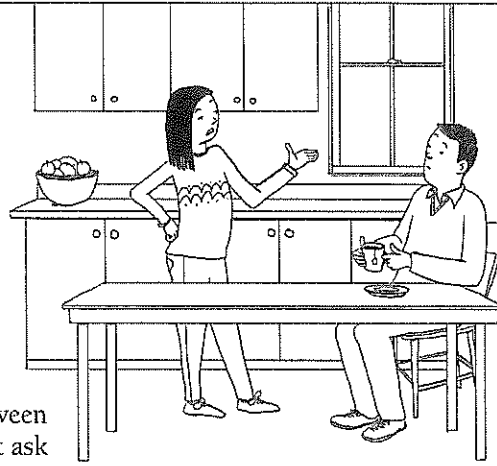


Respectful relationship

Your child is polite and respectful one minute, and rude and sarcastic the next. While it's natural for her to test your limits, she still needs to treat you with respect. Try the following strategies.

Be consistent

Respond the same way each time your tween is disrespectful. If she talks back, you might ask her to start over or to go to her room until she can be nice. If she snaps at you in a store, you could have her wait for you somewhere safe (like the checkout) or just end the trip early and go home.



Say *ouch*

It's okay to let your youngster know you're human. You might say, "It hurts my feelings when you mutter under your breath" or "It makes me angry when you interrupt me." Being aware of how disrespectful behavior affects you may encourage her to think twice.

Give alternatives

Instead of telling your child what *not* to say, explain what she *should* say. Also, remind her that her tone

matters just as much as—if not more than—her words. For instance, "Thanks, I heard about that" sounds nicer than "Duh!" And "I understand that's important to you" is better than "Whatever." 👍

Where in the world?

A good grasp of geography is about more than just being able to locate places on a map. It can also make your middle grader more aware of the world around him and help him understand events. Here are two ideas.

1. Hang up a world map, and have family members find places they hear or read about. They can write facts on sticky notes and put them on the correct locations on the map. For example, if your tween sees a documentary about the *Titanic*, he might locate the spots on the map where it sailed from, where it sank, and where it was headed.



2. Explore Google Maps. Your child can zoom in on your house, his favorite team's stadium, and even the Great Wall of China. Encourage him to learn more about the places he looks at. He could look up the weather for each location, find out its population, and see what time zone it's in. 👍

Q & A

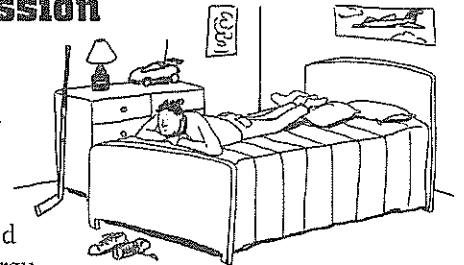
Recognizing depression

Q Lately, my son has been avoiding hanging out with friends, and he doesn't seem to have much energy. Could he be depressed?

A Children can indeed suffer from depression. While it's common for a child this age to get upset over issues like an argument with a friend or not making the tennis team, he should be able to move on within a few days. If he stays upset for a couple of weeks or longer, something deeper may be going on.

Pay attention to symptoms like being quieter or more irritable than usual, a lack of energy, a loss of interest in favorite activities, big changes in sleeping or eating habits, and complaints of headaches or stomachaches.

If your son doesn't seem like himself, trust your instincts, and have him checked. Talk to his pediatrician or school psychologist. They can determine whether your youngster is depressed and discuss ways to help him. 👍



Activity Corner

Word-smart activities

To communicate well, your tween needs a good vocabulary. These activities can increase the number of words she knows.

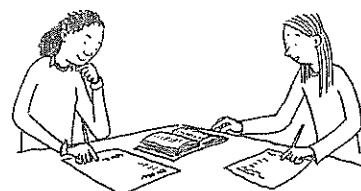
Word chain

Choose two words whose meanings have little or nothing in common (*lemon, calculator*). Write one at the top of a piece of paper and the other at the bottom. The goal is to make a word chain that connects the two words by a succession of related words in between. For example, you might come up with: lemon, lime,

tree, paper, pencil, calculator. *Idea:* Have players explain their reasoning for each word they choose. (Keep a dictionary and thesaurus handy for reference.)

Vocabulary bookmarks

When your middle grader comes across a new word while reading, suggest that she write it on a homemade bookmark. She can add the word and its definition to a strip of paper or an index card—and then start a new bookmark as she fills each one. Seeing the words every time she uses the bookmark will help her remember them. 👍



O U R P U R P O S E

To provide busy parents with practical ideas that promote school success, parent involvement, and more effective parenting.

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