

# Helping Students Learn<sup>®</sup>

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School

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## Prevent 'learned helplessness' if your child is struggling

Children learn at different rates, and a failure in school certainly doesn't mean that a child's academic career is doomed. But sometimes after a few failures in a row, students can become so afraid of failing again that they refuse to try new or challenging tasks. This crippling belief that they are unable to succeed is called *learned helplessness*.

To guard against learned helplessness after a setback, encourage your child to:

- **Be optimistic.** If she believes she can learn and improve, and concentrates on giving her best effort, she is more likely to succeed.
- **Tackle easier tasks first.** Students are often told to do their harder work first, to get it out of the way. But completing an easy task can give your child the confidence to keep going.
- **Give new learning strategies a try.** Would drawing pictures or graphs help her understand the material better? Does her comprehension improve if she records herself reading and plays it back?

Support your child by staying positive yourself. Tell her you know she can overcome this obstacle. And avoid speaking sarcastically or pointing out her faults. This won't motivate your child—it will hurt her.



## Use variety to boost reading skills

Even if your child would never pick up a novel by choice, don't make the mistake of labeling him a nonreader—he may just believe you. Instead, recognize the value in other kinds of reading. Encourage your child to read:

- **Magazines.** Short, easy-to-read articles can teach your middle schooler the fun of reading for interest. As long as the material is age-appropriate, this is constructive reading.
- **Sports scores.** Following teams teaches your child to read newspapers or websites for information. Ask him questions that require him to do a bit of research.
- **Nonfiction books.** These can build your child's fluency, comprehension and vocabulary skills.
- **Instruction manuals.** Your child will learn that reading can teach him a practical skill.
- **Text messages.** Texting is reading for communication. But if texts are the only thing your child reads, it's time to set limits and introduce some variety!

## Spring fever is not a valid reason to skip school

Your child's success in school depends on her attendance—even on warm spring days when she'd rather be doing something else. Be sure to:

- **Remind your child** that you expect her to attend every class, every day.
- **Forbid absences** for reasons such as being bored, tired or unprepared.
- **Work with the school** if you discover your child has been skipping classes or entire school days. Most problems can be solved when parents, students and schools work together.

## Promote healthy changes

Small changes can make a big difference in your child's health—and his ability to think. Here are two he can make now:

1. **Drink water**—and plenty of it. Your child's brain is 75 percent water. It needs to be hydrated to function well.
2. **Exercise more.** PE class isn't enough. Adolescents need at least an hour of exercise daily.



## Share a writing checklist

Middle schoolers can be very sensitive to criticism of their work. So turn the task of improving your child's writing over to her, and have her complete this checklist:

- **I've read through** the entire piece to see if it makes sense.
- **The introduction** clearly states the main idea of the paper.
- **My points flow** logically from one to the next.
- **I replaced vague words** with specific ones.
- **I shortened sentences** that were too long and wordy.





## How can I get my child to buckle down to homework?

**Q:** My child always studies for tests and quizzes, but he often skips doing his homework. How can I help him to take responsibility for his daily assignments?

**A:** Quizzes and tests may seem more significant to your child, but it's homework that reinforces his learning on a daily basis.



To help him take homework seriously:

- **Discuss the problem.** If you haven't spelled it out yet, do so now. "I've noticed that you are letting a lot of homework slide. That's not OK, so let's figure out how to change the situation."
- **Enforce a daily homework time.** Find a time that works for your child and stick to it. If he doesn't have any homework, he can use the time to review, work on a long-term project or read.
- **Connect homework to privileges.** "When you've finished your homework, you may watch TV." Check his work to make sure it's complete when he says it is.
- **Follow up.** If your strategies aren't working, get teachers involved. Let your child know you will be checking weekly to see whether he is turning in completed assignments. Decide what the consequence will be if you find he isn't. Then be sure to follow through.



## Are you focusing on after-school time?

Many middle schoolers spend hours after school on their own. For some, lack of adult supervision means more opportunities to get into trouble. Are you monitoring your child's time after school? Answer *yes* or *no* below.

- \_\_\_ **1. Do you keep** in touch with your child by phone when she is out of school and you are not with her?
- \_\_\_ **2. Do you make sure** your child has an adult contact after school, such as a relative, neighbor or sitter?
- \_\_\_ **3. Do you encourage** your child to participate in supervised extracurricular activities?
- \_\_\_ **4. Do you have** rules about who may be in the house when you are not home?

- \_\_\_ **5. Do you discuss** the dangers that kids face after school and how to avoid them?

### How well are you doing?

*More yes answers mean you are acting to keep your child safe and productive after school. For each no, try that idea.*

*"In automobile terms, the child supplies the power but the parents have to do the steering."  
—Dr. Benjamin Spock*

## You are still in charge

Your child is growing up. He understands more complex ideas. You may be allowing him more freedom, too. But your child still needs parenting, and he should respect you and other adults. Be sure to:

- **Insist on polite talk.** Don't tolerate rudeness. Tell your child you will respond when he speaks politely.
- **Enforce rules** and consequences.
- **Be kind** to your child and his friends, but don't try to be "one of the gang."
- **Base parenting decisions** on your judgment, not on what might please your child or his friends.

## Maintain motivation until the last bell rings

To keep your child focused until the final day of school:



- **Recognize** her progress and successes. Let her know how proud you are. Middle schoolers may act like they don't want your approval, but they really do.
- **Encourage** her to challenge herself.
- **Discuss** ways the skills she's learning will help her in the future.

## Enforce drug & alcohol rules

Alcohol and drug experimentation is *not* a normal rite of passage for young people. Just one use can harm your child. Make it clear that you expect him not to take the risk:

- **Be explicit.** Don't say "Be careful." Say, "You are never allowed to participate in these behaviors."
- **Give reasons.** "Underage drinking and illegal drug use are against the law. Both are also harmful to your health."
- **Do not allow** your child to socialize with known users without supervision.

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