



Exercise eases stress so your middle schooler can learn

Stress has a negative effect on student achievement. That means that no matter how much students have studied or prepared, if they show up to classes stressed-out, they can't give learning their best effort.

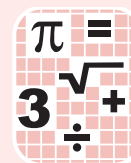
One effective way to help your child decrease stress is to promote daily physical activity. Exercise counteracts the negative effects of stress on learning and well-being by:

- **Boosting energy.** The endorphins exercise releases also improve alertness. A case of writer's block? Shooting some hoops might help your child return to the task focused and energized.
- **Calming the mind.** When middle schoolers are focused on the exercise at hand, they are likely to stop focusing on worries.

- **Increasing self-confidence.** When students feel like they have more control over their bodies, they often feel more in control of their studies as well.
- **Improving cognitive function.** Physical activity improves communication between brain cells, which can help students remember more. It also improves the brain's ability to recover from stressful experiences. If your child struggles to find time for exercise, explore simple ways to include physical activity in your family's daily routine. Consider activities you can do together, like having a stair-climbing contest, working out to a video, or even dancing to some favorite music.

Source: "Exercise and stress: Get moving to manage stress," Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research.

Help your child overcome math frustration



During middle school, students are introduced to abstract math concepts. If they've

missed basic concepts in earlier years, they may find it difficult to keep up in class now.

When this happens, students can become anxious and defensive. Their confidence may decrease, crippling their progress.

To help your child:

- **Express sympathy** if your child complains, "I don't get it!" Say, "This is challenging, but I know you *can* get it." Ask questions to help your child figure out what is confusing.
- **Get familiar with the math** your child is learning. Review math assignments and look online for videos that explain concepts.
- **Encourage your child** to focus on the concept rather than the procedure. This may help your child approach a problem in a new and different way.
- **Make the teacher an ally.** Ask about your child's progress. Are your child's difficulties common for this grade? What resources are available for special help?

Stay on the right track with a mid-year attendance review



The school year is almost halfway over, and the end of the calendar year is near. It is a natural time to pause and plan.

Take this opportunity to sit down with your child for a mid-year review. Discuss how the first half of the year went and set goals for the remainder.

This is also a time to assess your middle schooler's attendance record. Did your child attend school every day—except in the case of illness or family emergency? If so, congratulations! Encourage your child to keep up the good work for the rest of the year and beyond. Regular attendance is a strong predictor of success in school.

If your child's attendance has been less than ideal, now is the time to address it constructively:

- **Remind your child** that you expect attendance in every class.
- **Prioritize the need for rest**, nutrition, exercise and health safety measures so your child can stay in school.
- **Consider the reasons** you take your child out of school. Is it possible to make future appointments outside school hours?
- **Establish clear consequences** for skipping classes. Let your middle schooler know that skipping school erodes your trust.

“Be present, be engaged, and watch your knowledge grow.”

—Unknown

Community service teaches key skills and helps children thrive



Community service helps middle schoolers understand the needs and viewpoints of others. By helping,

middle schoolers also start to develop their own ideals and recognize they have both the power and the responsibility to help make them a reality.

On a practical level, volunteering can help your child learn new skills and discover new talents. It can offer opportunities to try out new experiences for short periods of time to see how they go.

Another big plus: Community service can have health and academic benefits for your child. Studies show that children who volunteer are less likely to take health risks, such as smoking. One study even showed that

students who perform community service do better on some tests.

Your child could:

- **Organize a group** to clean up a local park.
- **Read to preschoolers** or senior citizens.
- **Collect items** to include in care packages for deployed troops.
- **Shovel a driveway** for an elderly neighbor.
- **Make cards** for nursing home residents.
- **Organize donations** of reading materials to homeless shelters.
- **Be a volunteer coach** for a youth recreational league.
- **Organize a pet supply drive** for a local animal shelter.

Source: J. Bandy, “What is Service Learning or Community Engagement?” Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching.

Are you helping your child resist peer pressure?



Peer influence is strong in the middle school years. Are you doing all you can to help your child reject 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 to say *no* to risky behavior? Your child could say “I’m not interested” and walk away.
- ___ **3. Do you talk** to your child about how most middle schoolers feel pressured to fit in, too?
- ___ **4. Do you make** your family rules clear? Do you emphasize that your child can always talk to you when feeling pressured to break a rule?
- ___ **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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A self-editing checklist can help your child improve writing



It's hard to help middle schoolers with their writing assignments. By nature, adolescents are very sensitive to criticism and suggestions for improvement.

So when your child asks you to review a writing assignment, first focus on what you like about it. A catchy title. The introduction. Clear descriptions. Your favorite sentences.

Then, share this editing checklist so your child can improve writing independently:

- **I've read** through the entire piece to see if it makes sense.
- **I've focused** my writing on one important topic or idea.
- **The title** fits the piece.
- **The introduction** clearly states the main idea of the paper.
- **My points** flow logically from one to the next.
- **I used** a variety of transitional words.
- **I replaced** vague words with specific ones.
- **I deleted** unneeded words by combining short sentences.
- **I shortened** sentences that were too long and wordy.
- **I replaced** overused words.
- **I indented** new paragraphs.
- **I used** the correct subject verb agreement.
- **I checked** spelling, punctuation and capitalization.
- **I've given credit** to my sources and formatted citations correctly.

Retain authority to maintain the boundaries your child needs



Middle school can be a tricky time. While your child might look and act more like a young adult, it's vital to remember that

middle schoolers are still children who need guidance. Being an authority figure in your child's life is more important than ever.

To maintain healthy boundaries and mutual respect:

- **Insist that your middle schooler** speak politely to you and others. If your middle schooler is rude, say that you will respond when your child decides to speak respectfully—and walk away.
- **Require your child** to follow your rules. Middle schoolers shouldn't have a huge list of rules, but they should have a few important ones that must be followed. Agree on consequences and enforce them every single time.
- **Do not try to be the cool parent** in the neighborhood. Be kind and caring to your child and your child's friends, but remember that you are not "one of the gang." Children lose respect for adults who act like children.
- **Avoid oversharing.** Some things are more appropriate to discuss with another adult.
- **Do not make decisions** based on what would please your child's friends. They might like it if you paid for them all to see an R-rated movie, but is it a wise parenting choice? Trust yourself as the adult and make decisions accordingly.

Source: C. Giannetti and M. Sagarese, *The Roller-Coaster Years: Raising Your Child Through the Maddening Yet Magical Middle School Years*, Broadway Books.

Q: My seventh grader tends to put things off. If there is a big paper due, my child waits until the night before—sometimes, until very late on the night before. How can I help my child break the procrastination habit?

Questions & Answers

A: We all put some things off. But when it gets to be a habit, as it has for your middle schooler, procrastination can have serious consequences.

To help your student return to doing things in a timely way:

- **Ask why your child** puts things off. Some students are afraid of failing. Some like the thrill of dashing something off at the last minute. An others are simply unmotivated. Whatever the cause, your child needs to work on changing this habit before getting to high school.
- **Help your child** divide large projects into smaller tasks and set deadlines for each task. Your child may still wait until close to each deadline to finish that part, but bit by bit progress will be made. And once your child gets started on a project, it may be easier to keep working.
- **Encourage your child** to use small rewards as motivation. As your child finishes each task or assignment, it's time to take a ten-minute break and do something enjoyable, such as listening to music, walking around or reading an article.
- **Help your child connect** assignments to long-term goals. For example, learning how to study and getting better grades will help your middle schooler meet the goal of being successful in high school and in college.

It Matters: Test Prep

Improve your child's ability to remember



It can be challenging for students to recall what they have learned because the human brain is wired to forget.

However, with the right strategies, you can help your child improve retention. Here's how:

- **Be sure your child understands** the material. It's tough to memorize something without knowing what it means in the first place.
- **Set it to music.** Encourage your child to make up a tune to remember names, dates or math formulas. Music engages different parts of the brain, aiding recall.
- **Surround your child** with the material. If the class is studying a certain history topic, share books, movies and songs about it, too. The more exposure, the more likely the information is to sink in.
- **Encourage visualization.** Get your child to associate the material with a mental image. A picture really is worth a thousand words.
- **Make it personal.** Ask your child to explain the material to you. Students retain more when they restate things in their own words.
- **Remind your child to read** through all class notes every day. Afterward, your child can go back and try to recall the information.
- **Suggest that your child** review essential information just before bedtime. The brain processes and stores information while people sleep.

Test success begins with a checklist and study schedule

Middle schoolers have to keep track of lots of information for each of their classes. This is especially important at test time.

It is challenging for students to do well on a test if they don't know when the test is, what to study or which materials they need.

This is where a test checklist can help. To create one, your child should write down the:

- **Name** of the class.
- **Date** of the test.
- **Topics** the test will cover.
- **Format** of the test.
- **Materials** needed to study—handouts, notes, study guide.

Your child should also create a study schedule that takes the following factors into account:

- **How many days** in advance to begin studying.
- **How much time** to devote to studying each night.



- **How well your child** knows each topic—will it take relearning or will a review do it?
- **What else to do** besides reading—perhaps take a self-quiz or make flash cards.

Middle schoolers can tackle any test with this six-step process



While there are specific ways to approach specific kinds of tests, there are some general strategies can help students do their best on most tests.

Encourage your child to:

1. **Read the instructions twice** to ensure understanding.
2. **Underline direction words** such as *compare*, *list*, *describe*, *define* and *summarize*.
3. **Skim all the questions** quickly before starting, and decide how

much time to spend on each question.

4. **Read each question carefully.** Then, your middle schooler should think about the answer *before* reading any choices provided.
5. **Skip a question** if unsure of the answer. If the test format allows, your child should answer the “easy” questions first. Then, your child can come back to the others.
6. **Allow time to go back** and check answers. Do they make sense?