

Study Skills: The keys to getting ahead in middle school

Succeeding in middle school takes more than just smarts. As students mature and can take on more rigorous learning, their class periods grow longer and the educational material becomes increasingly more difficult than it was in elementary school. Is your child ready for the changes and the challenges? Educators agree it's not just the "best and brightest" who typically find themselves at the top of the middle school honor roll. Children who possess well-honed study and organizational skills are more likely to earn better grades in their middle school classes and are more likely to be better prepared for high school. If your child needs a little help to tackle the extra demands of middle school, here are a few tips to help her make the grade:

Make sure your child uses a planner to keep track of assignments

Planners aren't just for high school or college students. If your child's school doesn't provide one, you can pick one up at most office supply or department stores. Help your child get into the habit of writing down each assignment in each subject (most teachers have them posted in the classroom) and checking them off when they're complete. Together, you can also create an assignment board in your child's room, listing the names and dates of the bigger assignments on the horizon (think papers, tests and electronic reports). You can personalize the board together and make it a fun activity. It should have all the necessary information your child needs to remember important dates, but you can also decorate it with stickers and drawings. Remember: It's better to be over-prepared than under-prepared.

Provide a place to study

Some children need complete quiet to study, while others study better with soft music in the background. The key is finding a regular study place where your child will be comfortable, such as a desk, the kitchen table or a favorite chair. The desk or table surface should be large enough so your child can spread out papers and books. Also, make sure the essentials, such as pens, paper, and a calculator, are close by. Good lighting is also important.

Eliminate the obvious distractions

The allure of texting or talking on a cell phone may be too great for some children, so before your child sits down to study, the first order of business should be turning off the phone (not just turning the volume down). Other distractions that you should look out for are the radio, television, video games, and even you. Your family conversations can be a major distraction for your child. During your child's study time, steer clear of his space and designate it a no-talking zone. Once you get rid of as many distractions as you can, your child's study skills are likely to improve.

Develop an organizational system

Lots of students may have binders and folders, but they don't regularly use them. Remember those kids from your school who stuffed all their papers into one binder? Don't let your child make the same mistake. Make sure your child has a folder for each class and a system for keeping them organized. You might suggest, for example, that completed assignments go in the front and papers returned by the teacher go in the back. If your child is using a three-ring binder to keep her papers organized, make sure she takes the time to open the metal rings and place the papers securely in the binder. Remember: The "stuff" method doesn't work.

Don't wait until the last minute

Nothing good comes out of doing things at the last minute, so encourage your child to study a little every night instead of cramming late the night before the test. The same goes for writing papers. The night before a test or before a paper is due should be used for reviewing what your child already knows or proofreading and revising his writing before turning in his assignment.

Encourage your child to estimate how long each assignment takes

Building strong time management skills should start in middle school. Help your child determine how much time she'll need to devote to each assignment so she can plan a realistic schedule that incorporates study breaks and time for other activities and interests. Your child might want to schedule a short break after studying the most challenging subjects or completing the most rigorous assignments. Also, encourage your child to track the time she spends actually studying (rather than staring at a blank page) so together you can evaluate how effectively she's using her time. If you see your child spending too much time on one subject, it might be a signal that she needs some extra help or tutoring.

Create a study guide

Studying doesn't mean just reading notes or reading chapter after chapter of a textbook. One great way for your child to study is for him to make a list of important information from a chapter, written in his own words rather than copied from the book. Coach your child to write down any words printed in bold or italics. Encourage him to look at chapter headings, section headings and review pages at the ends of chapters for other important information to add to his study guide. He can then merge all of his information with his class notes to create an ultimate personal study guide.

Make study cards

Study cards aren't just effective when it comes to math. They can help in every subject. Guide your child to write a word or idea on the front of a card and write the definition or important information on the back. You can then ask her about the word or idea and have her give you the information. For example, on the front of a card write, "Treaty of Versailles," and on the back write, "Peace treaty between Germany and Allies at end of WWI in 1919."

Form study groups

For middle schoolers, study groups can quickly turn into chatting sessions, so before you host one, make sure you set a goal of what material should be covered. A study group can be beneficial for all who participate. Group members can work together to make sure everyone understands key concepts and then informally quiz each other on information they'll need to remember. To keep everyone on task from the beginning, make sure they all have their study materials in order and that they have a plan for what they want to cover in the time they have. And if the group completes their study goals before time runs out, let them chat away.

Taking Good Notes

Good note-taking skills can help your child do well on everything from taking tests to writing papers. And those skills will stay with them all the way through college and beyond.

Unfortunately, most schools don't offer classes that focus on the importance of taking effective notes. So, here are a few tips to share with your child that can help them improve their note-taking skills:

- Write down key facts. If the teacher writes notes on the board, copy them. If not, tune your ear to listen for important facts and concepts that your teacher says out loud, such as the key dates of a battle or the years of a certain era (e.g., the years of the Renaissance), or the specific steps of a math formula. Remember: If a teacher repeats specific information more than once, it's probably important.
- Don't go overboard. Writing down every word isn't the way to go. After all, no one writes as fast as someone can talk. Focus on the key points and go over them when you do your homework.
- Don't be afraid to ask. If you miss something, it's fine to ask a teacher to repeat it. Chances are, some of your classmates want to hear the information again, too.
- Organize. Keep notes for each subject in one place so you can easily find them. For many students, that means keeping a separate notebook for each subject, or using a ring binder with dividers or a three- or five-subject notebook. Some teachers have specific requirements when it comes to notebooks. When they don't, choose the style of notebook that works best for you.
- Compare. Keep your notes handy when you're doing reading assignments. Compare your notes to what you read. Going over notes with a friend can also help you figure out what you might have missed and reinforce what you've learned.

Web Guide for more information

- Taking great notes (<http://www.greatschools.org/students/homework-help/take-great-notes.gs?content=323>)
- Homework: A guide for parents (http://www.nasonline.org/resources/home_school/homework.aspx)
- Top 10 tips for middle school students (http://www.suny.edu/student/countdown_to_suny_middle.cfm)

- Transitioning to middle school
(http://www.newsforparents.org/expert_transitioning_to_middle_school.html)
- Building good homework habits (http://math-and-reading-help-for-kids.org/articles/Building_Good_Homework_Habits.html)
- Helping your middle school student with homework
(<http://www.educationminnesota.org/en/community/studentsuccess/homeworktips.aspx>)