

Tips from the Counselors

Susan Christian A-K and Karen Wallace L-Z

Although your middle schooler is becoming more independent and is increasingly involved in activities outside the family, you should and must remain the most influential person in his or her life. Through your involvement in school and extracurricular, you can do much to help your child believe in the value and importance of education, be enthusiastic about learning, and achieve academic success.

As middle-school counselors, a big part of our job is to help parents support their children emotionally as well as academically. Here is our best advice for parents of preteens:

1. Help your child manage homework time. Encourage her to aim high and always do her best work. Check with teachers to see how much time should be necessary to complete homework. See what your school offers to help you help your child, such as an agenda planner or some other homework reminder system, and/or a Web site with helpful links.

2. Show interest in his studies by talking with him daily about what he's learning and doing in school (don't take "nothing" for an answer!). If you know your child has a project for science, get involved. The same goes for cheerleading, sports, and music — any extracurricular activities.

3. Discuss ideas and feelings about school, studies, and activities. Be realistic about what your child can and should be able to do. Don't expect great grades or high test scores if she isn't capable. That expectation will only cause unnecessary frustration.

4. With your child, read and review the information that schools and districts provide. Be familiar with the pupil progression plan, course offerings, student handbook, etc. All these will help you and your child successfully weave your way through the maze called middle school.

5. Contact counselors and teachers periodically. Find out what your child should be learning, how she is progressing, and how you can help. Be a full partner in your child's education.

6. Be sure that he attends school on a regular basis. Even if he is absent for illness or another valid reason, he needs to keep up with his studies. Call the school if your child will be missing a day, and find out what he needs to do to make up for it.

7. Encourage her to pursue interests and make friends through extracurricular activities. Be certain, however, that she selects no more than a few activities so she has adequate time for schoolwork. You must help her find a balance; this will take compromise and patience.

8. Know his friends. Who does your child hang out with? Follow up on any suspicions that you may have. It is better to be safe than sorry at this time of his life. Know where your child is at all times. Be clear and consistent with discipline.

9. Make it clear that she must follow school rules and policies. Teach her to respect people as well as property. Help her know right from wrong and what she must do when negative temptations come her way.

10. Encourage him to get to know his counselor and to maintain contact throughout his middle-school years, if possible. Not only will the counselor be invaluable in supporting his academic path, he's also one of many potential adult role models for your child.

11. Attend parent meetings, open houses, booster clubs, parent education groups, and other activities for parents. I mentioned this before, but it is very important for your child!

12. Volunteer at school. Both your child and the school will benefit from your involvement and help. Schools solicit volunteers to help in a variety of ways: tutoring, assisting in the media center, giving speeches, helping out at activities, chaperoning, etc.

13. Consistently acknowledge and reward efforts at school. Many parents expect the school to provide the incentives for their child's accomplishments. While schools do have a lot of motivation programs, parents need to recognize their child's successes too. When your child works hard, your acknowledgment motivates him to persist.

None of us are perfect and we sometimes make mistakes in raising our children. But your child needs your love and respect. She needs to become independent, responsible, and self-sufficient to succeed in most of her endeavors in school and at home. The best way to help her in all aspects of development is to try to ensure that her emotional needs are consistently met. Your understanding, common sense, adult judgment, and good sense of humor can make these middle-school years a joy for both you and your child!