Middle School Parents® still make the difference!

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Walden Academy Charter School

Use four strategies to spark your child's interest in STEM

It is common for students to think science and math are too hard. Many kids believe they are simply "not good" at these subjects. However, when middle schoolers try fun, hands-on activities, they often realize these subjects are actually exciting!

If your child thinks science or math is boring or difficult, here are four easy ways to spark interest:

1. **Find science videos or games** online. Websites like YouTube or Common Sense Media have educational shows, experiments and interactive games for kids of all ages.
2. **Head to the kitchen.** As you prepare a meal together, ask questions to get your child thinking:
   - » *Why do you think water boils when it gets hot?*
   - » *What happened when we forgot to add baking powder to the cookies?"*
   - » *How much flour will we need if we double this recipe?*
3. **Visit a natural history museum** or science center in person or online. These places help children see how nature, science and technology have changed over time and explain how everyday things work.
4. **Focus on growth.** Learning something new is often tough at first. Talk about the new skills your child is gaining and how those skills might be useful in the future. Say you are proud of how hard your child is working.

Source: M. Pinola, "How to Get Your Kids Interested in STEM (Without Forcing It on Them)," LifeHacker.

Boost academic achievement with exercise

Stress can lower students' performance in the classroom. It often comes with exhaustion and distraction—neither of which is helpful for learning. One simple and effective way to help your middle schooler reduce stress is to encourage daily movement.

Physical activity:

- **Can help your child** feel happier. The endorphins exercise releases also increase energy levels.
- **Is calming.** While focused on the activity, your child is likely to stop focusing on worries.
- **Improves memory.** Exercise increases blood flow to the brain, which can help your child stay alert and remember more.
- **Increases self-confidence.** Exercise helps students feel in control of their bodies—which can inspire them to take control of their studies.

When planning your child's schedule, try to fit in at least 30 minutes of exercise daily.

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

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Build background knowledge to support reading comprehension

Research shows that students understand what they read much better when they already know something about the topic. This is called *background knowledge.*

Being familiar with a topic allows your child to focus more on meaning rather than decoding when reading—making comprehension and learning easier.

To help your child build a strong base of knowledge:

- **Read about the world.** Encourage your child to read news articles. Many will cover topics your child will likely encounter in schoolwork.
- **Explore new things.** Visit museums, watch educational shows or go to historic sites. These real-life experiences may connect to something your child reads in the future.
- **Share your experiences.** Talk to your child about places you have been, hobbies you enjoy or different jobs you have had.

Source: K. Allan and M. Miller, *Literacy and Learning: Strategies for Middle and Secondary School Teachers,* Houghton Mifflin.

> **"Develop a passion for learning. If you do, you will never cease to grow."**
>
> *—Anthony J. D'Angelo*

Teach your middle schooler to focus on six key areas of writing

Helping middle schoolers with their writing can be tricky. They're often sensitive to criticism and resistant to suggestions for improvement.

Instead of offering feedback *after* your child writes something, try offering guidance *before* your child begins. Encourage your student to focus on these six key areas:

1. **Ideas and content.** The points should be relevant and well supported. The reader should easily understand exactly what your child is trying to say.
2. **Choice of words.** Strong writing "paints a picture." When your child describes something, the reader should be able to visualize it. Every word should add meaning, not just fill up space.
3. **Organization.** Solid writing has a clear beginning, middle and ending. Points should flow logically and stay on topic.
4. **Sentence structure.** Writing should be clear and easy to follow. Sentences should flow naturally, like a real conversation. Help your child avoid repeating the same starting words. For example, if one sentence begins with "I feel," the next one should start differently.
5. **Voice.** Your child's writing should represent your child's personality, feelings and tone.
6. **Mechanics.** This is the final step. Remind your child to proofread writing to check for correct spelling, grammar and punctuation.

Have you made academic honesty a high priority?

In a survey from the Center for Academic Integrity, a whopping 95 percent of high school students admitted to having participated in some form of cheating. Are you addressing this with your child before high school? Answer *yes* or *no* to the questions below to find out:

1. **Do you set a positive example** for your child by being honest yourself?
2. **Have you spoken** with your child about the school's honor code and the importance of following it?
3. **Have you discussed** different types of cheating, such as finding answers to test questions online, sharing answers and using apps or AI to do work your child is supposed to do?
4. **Have you explained** that copying passages without giving credit to the sources is also cheating?
5. **Have you said** that cheating is always wrong and talked about the consequences?

How well are you doing?

Mostly *yes* answers mean you are encouraging honest work. For *no* answers, try those ideas.

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Practical Ideas for Parents to Help Their Children.

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Four ways to support academic success during middle school

Studies show that family support remains vital for middle schoolers. In fact, what you do at home is often more impactful than volunteering at school.

Try these four research-based strategies to help your child succeed in the classroom:

1. **Connect learning to real life.** Talk about what your child is learning. Then, find ways to use those lessons in everyday life. For example, can your child apply math skills to figure out the most economical route to a destination? This demonstrates the importance and relevance of education.
2. **Talk about the future.** Does your child want to be an architect, a mechanic or a fashion designer? Help your middle schooler investigate the education and training necessary to prepare for careers of interest. Remind your child that even if interests change, a solid education is the ticket to achieving any goal.
3. **Share your expectations.** When students know that their families believe in them and expect them to work hard, they feel more motivated to do their best.
4. **Encourage reading for pleasure.** Making time for recreational reading remains one of the most effective ways to boost literacy, vocabulary and thinking skills. Keep a variety of books, magazines and articles available at home—and model reading habits yourself!

Source: D. Viadero, "Scholars: Parent-School Ties Should Shift in Teen Years," Education Week.

Foreign language study builds key skills for learning and more

Today, fewer students in the U.S. are learning to speak a language other than English. But research shows there are significant benefits to learning another language.

When students study foreign languages, they enhance their:

- **Memory skills.** Language students must learn and remember lots of new vocabulary. They find that strengthening their memory is like strengthening a muscle. The more they use it, the stronger it gets.
- **Understanding** of their first language. Students start to figure out how language works. That understanding helps them improve writing, reading, and even testing skills. Students who speak a second language consistently score higher on standardized tests.
- **Problem-solving skills.** Studies show that students who speak two languages also do better in math and science.
- **Sense of achievement.** Learning another language is a challenge. As students master it, they see they can tackle difficult subjects.
- **Ability to get a job.** Many employers want to hire people who can speak more than one language.
- **Cultural awareness.** Exposure to new languages fosters a deeper appreciation for different perspectives and global traditions.

Source: "What Does Research Show About the Benefits of Language Learning?" American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

Questions & Answers

Q: My child is hanging out with some kids who aren't very kind. I'm afraid my child will give into peer pressure and start acting the same way. What should I do?

A: Definitely talk to your child but try not to focus on just one specific friend. Instead, have a general conversation about what makes a good friend. Ask questions like:

- *What fun things do you do together?*
- *What do you enjoy most about hanging out with them?*
- *What things do you believe in or care about?*
- *How do you feel when you are around them?*

It could be that these friends make your child feel more mature. Or it could be that your child is uncomfortable with how these kids act but doesn't know how to handle it.

Here are a few ways to steer your child through this situation:

- **Avoid critical comments.** Belittling friends or their families may make your child feel the need to defend them.
- **Ask guiding questions.** Instead of judging, try something like, "It sounds like your friend was rude to the teacher. How did that make you feel?" This kind of broad question may encourage your child to open up.
- **Be supportive.** Remind yourself that your child isn't weak when affected by peer pressure. Say that these situations are hard and that you are there to help your child figure things out.
- **Set clear rules.** If you are truly worried about these friends, it is OK to step in. Supervise the time your child spends with them or limit how often they hang out.

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It Matters: Schoolwork

Share strategies for managing schoolwork

Students need strong study skills to be successful in middle school—and you can help your child develop them. The study skills your student learns now will help today, in high school and beyond.

To lay the groundwork for academic success:

- **Encourage your child** to break down large projects into smaller pieces. Middle schoolers often get rattled by long-term assignments. Smaller parts are less intimidating. Have your child set a deadline for each part.
- **Have your child estimate** how long an assignment will take and plan time accordingly. Then, have your child use a timer to see if estimates were accurate. This will help your student make adjustments for future assignments.
- **Increase self-awareness.** Recommend doing schoolwork when your child is most alert. If your child needs to let off some steam, encourage a run or a brisk walk before sitting down to work.
- **Be flexible** about where your child works. Allow working where it's comfortable—whether that's at the kitchen table or on the couch. Just make sure that the space has adequate lighting and is free from distractions.
- **Promote organization.** Help your child create a system to keep track of important assignments. It might be a planner, an app or a desk calendar.

Don't let digital devices derail your middle schooler's studies

It seems like middle schoolers are glued to their phones and tablets. They text, watch videos and scroll through social media all day.

It is no surprise that students try to use these devices while doing schoolwork. However, research shows that using phones or social media while studying leads to lower grades.

Students might think using a device to watch a history video or check a math answer helps them study. The problem is that they rarely stay focused. Soon, they switch from that history video to a viral clip, and their schoolwork is forgotten.

To help your child stay focused:

- **Talk about multitasking.** Explain that research shows it doesn't work. To learn, students need to focus on one thing at a time.
- **Prevent distraction.** Multitasking makes assignments take much longer. Have your child leave the phone or tablet in a different room while studying.

Four habits can make your child's study time effective

In middle school, schoolwork is about more than memorizing facts. Students need to think more deeply about what they learn. By helping your child adopt these study habits, you can foster the kind of thinking that makes study time more effective.

Encourage your child to make using these techniques a habit:

1. **Ask six key questions.** Your child should always ask: *who, what, when, where, why* and *how.* The answers will help your child understand reading assignments and create better outlines.
2. **Learn the vocabulary.** Students often struggle because they do not know what words mean. Encourage your child to look up definitions for unfamiliar words.
3. **Weigh information.** Teach your child to find the main idea. If a sentence says, "Juan's blue shirt was wet with tears," ask if the color of the shirt or the fact that Juan was crying is more important.
4. **Compare and contrast.** Help your child practice finding how things are the same or different. This skill is especially useful for history and English. Ask your child to compare two things, such as how the life of a soldier in the Revolutionary War was the same as or different from the life of a modern-day soldier.