

# Confident ~ Connected ~ Challenged

Tools for thriving during the middle school years

## Build a productive parent-teacher team

Don't wait until Back to School Night to meet your child's teachers. Get off to a good start by following these four tips for productive parent-teacher relationships:

**Make contact early.** Sift through the pile of papers that your child brings home the first week of school. Look for contact information for each of your child's teachers. Create a contact list with any information you can find. Finally, post the list in a visible location in anticipation of sending an email or leaving a voice mail during the second or third week of school.

**Focus on the positive.** Choose something positive to comment on in your initial conversation or email with teachers. Statements like, "The outline of class assignments in the syllabus is very helpful" or, "Thank you for taking the time to lay out the scope of the year" tell a teacher you care about your child's learning and appreciate the time and effort the teacher has invested. Commenting on the inclusion of a teacher's biography or the promise of challenging course content also creates a positive impression about your commitment to the school year and your child's learning.

**Connect in person.** When Back to School Night finally arrives, make your way through the crowd of anxious parents vying for the teacher's attention and warmly introduce yourself. Your past efforts at communication will have paved the way for a solid relationship in the year ahead.

**Maintain contact.** Continue to build your relationship by sending an email or leaving a voice mails every four to six weeks to share something positive (your child's enjoyment of the class, the interesting selection of readings, and so on). If you ever need to discuss a challenging topic such as academic progress or a peer-related issue, it's more likely your questions will find a welcoming ear.

Your initial connection with teachers is meant to lay the foundation for a year-long relationship. Given that children spend a significant number of their waking hours at school, teachers play an essential role in your child's life. With their support and encouragement, both you and your child will be better able to thrive in the months ahead.

**Interesting factoid:** The last United States Census reported that middle schoolers spend the majority of their waking hours in the care of someone other than their parents.

## Questions from you

*Parent question:* My moody middle schooler struggles with organization and long-term planning, leaving me feeling frustrated. What's happening and how I can help?

*What science says:* The area directly behind the forehead, known as the prefrontal cortex, controls planning, working memory, organization and mood changes. Middle school marks the beginning of prefrontal cortex development for most children.

*Coaching tips to help you through:*

Experiment with different organization systems, looking for one that best matches your child's needs. Remember, the system *you* use may not be best for your child.

Acknowledge your child's need to "cool off" in times of emotional distress. Resist the urge to jump in and save the day with questions like, "What's wrong?" or "How can I help?" Instead, try a statement, "I'm ready to listen when you are ready to talk."

## Focus on Family

Thriving as a family means talking about potential middle school hotspots before they grow into full blown wildfires. Find a time to talk with your child when you can review your expectations in the following four hotspots:

- Cell phone use at home (when, where and how often?)
- The afterschool hours (what is the new routine?)
- Weekends (where can your child go unsupervised i.e., the mall, movie theater, park, etc.?)
- Academic achievement (what grades do you expect to see on your child's report card?)

## Organize for achievement

Help your child manage the continual flow of assignments, notes and projects with the three simple tools.

**#1 Binder.** Look for the words "heavy duty" when purchasing your child's binder. Teachers will expect your child to bring home (and return) homework, notes and projects in quality condition. Further organize the binder with a set of dividers that can be used to separate papers by individual subjects. Keeping the flow of paper organized by subject speeds up the study process and keeps homework frustration to a minimum.

**#2 Backpack.** "Heavy duty" should also describe the bag or backpack you purchase. Middle schoolers are known for the abuse they inflict on their backpacks. Heavy canvas bags cost more, but last longer than their nylon counterparts. A backpack's sole purpose is to safely transport books, binders and folders to and from school. Coaching your child to clear out his backpack on a weekly basis will limit the amount of accessory items (food, clothing and small animals) that shorten a bag's lifespan.

**#3 File Crate.** When assignments, tests and projects no longer need to be stored in a binder they can be moved to a file crate. A standard milk crate and box of hanging files combine to form a highly effective organization system for future middle school study sessions. Each hanging file corresponds to a separate subject and section in the binder. Resist the temptation to manage your child's binder and file crate. The responsibility for both items is well within a middle schooler's ability. You can however, help your child identify a regular schedule for removing and filing papers, and then hold him accountable for completing the activity. As a general rule most binders need to be emptied on a monthly basis.

*Next month's issue:*

- Middle school bullying
- Homework in half the time
- Choices, consequences and consistency
- Questions from you:

send yours to [questions@MiddleSchoolYears.com](mailto:questions@MiddleSchoolYears.com)