

## **Getting Organized During Middle School**

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Kids in middle school quickly find out that it sure is different than the security and familiarity of the grade school environment. The facility is typically larger, everyone has a locker, there's at least six classes a day to attend with only four or five minutes in between to chat with friends and to manage to get to the next class on time. Then there's the homework and dealing with six different teachers. Those are just a few of the reasons why sixth graders, especially, feel considerable stress and confusion. Throw in some blossoming hormones as well as developing bodies, a fight here and there in the hallways and the beginnings of adolescent peer pressure difficulties, and it's a recipe for disaster.

Middle school often comes as a shock to the system, and it's the wise parent who is prepared to support and guide their kid through the transition from the relative stability and security of grade school to the somewhat chaotic environment found in many of our middle schools. The problem is often due to kids lacking organizational skills, not being particularly interested in managing their time efficiently and perhaps not caring about their grades as much as they should. In response parents tend to become concerned, generally reacting by nagging about homework completion and staying on track, grounding for slacking off, or just plain giving up on the kid.

To help these children, especially those hitting the middle school wall, I've developed a program consisting of study skill training and organizational techniques that I teach to just about any kid who I can get my hands on! In addition, I offer behavior management

guidelines to their folks to use in order to motivate their children to work my program. I've found that both parts are necessary for children to achieve good grades in middle school—your daughter can learn brilliant organizational skills but unless she's motivated to use them on a consistent basis, she probably won't. Plain and simple.

Interested in setting the stage for academic achievement? Okay, let's get going! There are five steps to getting and staying organized.

### **STUDY SKILL TRAINING:**

- **Set up a daily assignment sheet.** Whether your middle-schooler uses a day planner, PDA or just a sheet of notebook paper, it's imperative that he write down, *for all academic classes*, all homework assigned that day or tests/quizzes announced. Preteens and teenagers are notorious for depending upon their memories, and aside from the sheer volume of work that may be assigned, they have lots of other stuff to remember (friends' phone numbers, the latest gossip and the next soccer practice date). So, it's important to mandate that all work is noted on the planner, for each class, every day. Many kids also have each teacher initial the planner at the end of each class—just to double-check that what they wrote down for homework and tests is accurate and complete.
- **Use a homework organizer folder.** Have the child put the daily assignment sheets in the right side pocket, all papers to be completed, filed or thrown away kept in the left side pocket, and all work to be turned in to the teacher stays in the

center pocket—preferably in a clear file so that the child can easily determine if there are papers that still need to be turned in.

- **Review the assignment sheet at the locker.** So far, so good? Great! Now, you have to convince your kid to *use* the planner while standing at the locker at the end of the school day. Have your daughter pull out the assignment sheet and check that when deciding what books, notebooks and folders need to be brought home.
- **Complete homework and study for tests in a timely manner.** Some families find that it works best if the child has some down time after school to shoot hoops, catch some TV or talk on the phone. Other folks have greater success with the kids grabbing a quick snack and then it's time to hit the books. Whatever works best in your family—do it, it's an individual decision.
- **Check that all work has been completed.** Once the child reports that all written work, reading and studying are completed be sure to check the planner to what has been completed and make sure that all assignments are done well. You may want to give your child a quick quiz on certain subjects to be certain that she really does understand the material studied. If an assignment is not due the next day, write it down on a monthly calendar that your kid keeps on the study desk, and be sure to review this with her daily. Plan to study at least one day ahead for quizzes and at least two days in advance for major tests. Try to get book reports

and projects completed at least one day in advance—this allows for emergencies to be dealt with (the printer running out of ink, necessitating a quick trip to the office supply store). Your child will soon learn that planning ahead pays off in terms of a better product and less stress.

- **Organize the book bag for the next day.** Needless to say, you don't need the kid running around in the morning trying to locate paper, pencils and completed worksheets. That should be accomplished the night before when there is plenty of time and no pressure to hurry up, eat breakfast and catch the bus for school. Packing the night before is a good habit to develop not only in terms of school work, but also for preparing for baseball practice, ballet and computer class.

### **MOTIVATING THE UNMOTIVATED:**

Okay, so now you understand the five steps inherent in organizing your middle-schooler. But there's always the alert parent who questions "How do I get my child to do this? He'll forget to write down his assignments, or even if he does write them down, he may not remember to check the assignment sheet at the locker, and leave the books at school." Well, yes, that does happen and all too often when it comes to working with middle-schoolers!

Many kids do not see the value in completing all of their work every day, and some even purposely leave books, worksheets and folders at school so that they will not have to

study that evening at home. If your child is not internally motivated to complete homework and to study for tests—don't fret—that's normal. It's just very unpleasant and usually leads to nightly arguments, parental hand-wringing and kids placed on restriction! What to do? Well, I suggest *bribing* them to complete their responsibilities. There's nothing wrong with stating consequences (both positive and negative) for task completion or lack thereof. As far as I'm concerned, doing one's best at school is one the primary jobs of childhood. Not all kids will be "A" students, but they should give it their best effort.

Using the following five consequences to "jump-start" your child's motivation will most likely bring success, better grades and end the nightly homework drama in your household. If the child completes the daily assignment sheet, brings home all necessary books and materials, completes written work and studies for tests, and packs the book bag for the next day, then he should be rewarded. *Daily* I offer a *money allowance* (therefore no cash is given for just showing up alive on Saturday), a *clothing allowance* (please don't continue to cave in and buy sneakers and shirts on a whim now that your child is earning her own clothing money), a *privilege token* that can be saved up and cashed in later to go the movies, bowling, concerts, paint ball (poker chips work well), *outside play* and use of *electronics* for the remainder of the day (TV, video games, telephone, computer, etc.). These five rewards get most kids' attention, and motivate them to write down and complete assignments in a timely fashion.

With school approaching or having just begun, it's important to help your middle-schooler with proven organizational tools that are simple to use, make sense and quickly lead to good grades. Motivating the unmotivated with rewards (or taking them away for irresponsible behavior) is a proven, effective technique that will work in most homes—but you must be consistent. Once your kid gets the idea that you only “spot check” the homework, you may see less getting completed and more time spent emailing friends or talking on the telephone. Be consistent, stay involved, and use rewards and motivators that are important and interesting to your children.