

Helping Students Learn[®]

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School



April 2012

Hamilton Wentworth Catholic District
School Board

Defining and categorizing build thinking & comprehension skills

In middle school, your child is required to make associations and sift out key ideas while he reads. One step toward this skill is the ability to define and categorize.

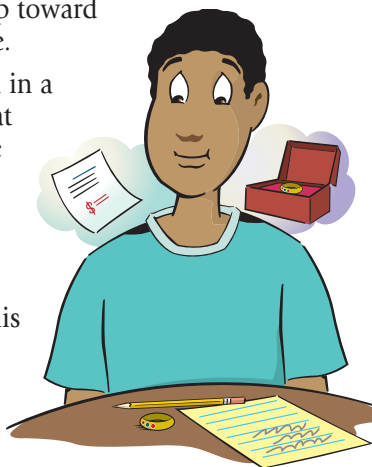
Our brains can take in a lot of information in a short amount of time. However, not all of that information is always useful. That's where the ability to define and categorize information comes in. It helps the brain decide which information is important, and how it relates to what you already know.

Here is an example to help you work on this with your child. (You can use any object or concept in place of the example.)

1. **Show your child a ring**, and ask, "What is this?" He will probably look at you like you're crazy, then say, "It's a ring."
2. **Ask, "Can you put it in a category?"** He may say, "It's jewelry."
3. **Now ask, "What else"** can you tell me, now that we know it's a ring and a piece of jewelry?" Brainstorm with your child. Some ideas to get you and your child started include, "It's valuable." "It means a lot to you." "We should keep it in a safe place." "You wear it when you get dressed up."

Explain to your child that defining and categorizing allowed you both to share—and learn—a lot more knowledge.

Source: D. Johnson and C. Johnson, *Homework Heroes*, Kaplan Publishing.



Model respectful speaking

If you don't speak to your child with respect, she will never learn to speak respectfully—to you or anyone else. To model respect:

- **Start with the basics.** A simple "good morning" goes a long way.
- **Be attentive.** Look at your child when she is speaking to you.

Source: A.J. Packer, *The How Rude! Handbook of Family Manners for Teens*, Free Spirit Publishing.

Questions expand research

Research projects help students learn to formulate questions and then answer them. To get your child thinking about his research, ask:

- **Is the information** you gathered relevant? Does it answer your research questions?
- **Is your data** current and from reliable sources?
- **Does it feel** like you missed anything?
- **Do you have** more questions as a result of your research?
- **What did you** learn about your topic? Was the research hard? Easy?



Find chances to boost responsibility

Adolescents don't morph into responsible young adults overnight. It's a process, and it takes time. To nurture your child's sense of responsibility:

- **Enforce consequences** if your child breaks the rules. This will remind her that she is responsible for her actions.
- **Assign chores.** Chores are ideal for building responsibility, and completing them will make your child feel capable.
- **Let her make choices.** Whenever it's reasonable—and safe—for her to make her own decisions, stand back and let her.
- **Have her manage money.** Nothing hammers home the responsibility message like empty pockets! Give your child opportunities to earn money and teach her how to manage those earnings.

Source: M. Purcell, "Building Responsible Kids," Psych Central, <http://psychcentral.com/lib/2006/building-responsible-kids>.

Embrace technology to practice writing skills

Your child may be tech-savvy, but that doesn't mean she should forget about writing! Encourage her to:

- **Write a family blog** to keep relatives up to date.
- **Write online reviews.** She can write book reviews if she's an avid reader or movie reviews if she loves to watch films.
- **Write long emails** to friends.



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How can middle schoolers keep busy after school?

Q: I believe that my seventh grader is mature enough to stay by herself after school. Still, I hate the thought of her being home alone every afternoon. Since I have a full-time job, should I hire a sitter—even though she insists she doesn't need one?

A: Not necessarily. This doesn't need to be an "all or nothing" solution. Since you feel your child is responsible enough to stay alone for a few hours each day, the solution may be to limit her "alone time" to a couple of days each week. You might:



- **Look into after-school activities**, such as after-school care, sports or other extracurricular activities. See what your local community center has to offer for kids. If you find an interesting weekday program for your child, she may be eager to go there every few days.
- **Enlist family.** Is a nearby relative willing to hang out once a week with your child? They may both end up loving that quality time together!
- **Set rules for when your child must be alone.** How should she check in with you when she arrives home—by phone, text message or email? Is she allowed to have certain friends over? Is she allowed to use the stove or oven unsupervised?



Are you still focusing on attendance?

April often heralds the return of warmer days. But it's not summer yet—and your child needs to be in school, on time, until it is. Answer the following questions *yes* or *no* to see if you are continuing to promote regular, on-time school attendance:

- ___ **1. Do you make** clear to your child that attending school is his first priority?
- ___ **2. Do you avoid** taking your child out of school unless it is an emergency? (Even a few hours for an appointment can result in your child missing key concepts, especially with end-of-year tests looming.)
- ___ **3. Do you let** school officials know if your child has a true excused absence (illness, family emergency) and encourage them to notify you if your child is not in school and they have not heard from you?

- ___ **4. Do you encourage** your child to take steps that will get him to school on time, such as setting an alarm clock?

How did you do? Each yes answer means you are conveying the importance of attendance to your child. For each no answer, try that idea from the quiz.

"Eighty percent of success is showing up."
—Unknown

Say less—and listen more

When you talk with your child, does he tune out? Roll his eyes? Brace for another lecture? If you feel like you're not getting through to him, ask a friendly question or make an interesting comment. Then be silent. Middle schoolers take longer than adults to process information. The silence might be awkward—especially for you. But your child will get a chance to think and respond. Your relationship can't help but deepen.

Source: P. Mountrose, *Tips and Tools for Getting Thru to Kids*, Holistic Communications.

Know how to discipline in the middle school years

The middle school years are a time of questioning authority. To help your child understand your discipline, talk with her and share your thinking. She's more likely to follow rules if you express confidence in her ability to understand.

What makes a 'good book'?

Do you expect your middle schooler to find his own reading materials? That's fine—as long as he knows what to look for. A little advice can make selections more rewarding. Encourage him to look for books with:

- **Characters** that are his age or older and described in detail.
- **Quick starts.** The beginning of the book can't be boring. (Read the first paragraph of books in the store or library.)
- **Easy-to-read writing** with a limited number of unfamiliar words.
- **Short chapters**—they keep the pages turning.



Source: J. Shefelbine, *Encouraging Your Junior High Student to Read*, International Reading Association.

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