

How to Survive Middle School: A Parents' Guide to Working with Teachers

Middle-schoolers are a different breed. As a teacher-friend says, "They cry like babies when you don't treat them like adults." They are not sweet little elementary kids anymore, but young teens aren't grownups yet either. Some days we're not even sure they are human! Life is dramatic and turbulent, and parents don't always know how to respond when a teen's mood swings take over the household, or when their normally pleasant teen starts getting in trouble at school. Below you will find some practical advice to working with teachers and schools to help you and your middle-schooler survive and thrive.

"He's never done that before."

I hear this a lot from parents whose child has some kind of trouble in class--a pattern of missing homework, behavior changes, or disruptions. It's true, your child may have never missed a homework assignment before, but he also has never been in seventh grade before. Students who always earn As suddenly skip a major project; quiet, polite kids start talking back. It's not desirable, but it's normal. So when a teacher comes to you with concerns about your child, acknowledge these changes and support the teacher's efforts to address the problem. Offer suggestions and follow up at home. When parents and teachers work together, it shows teens they can't get away with undesirable behavior and they can expect consequences both at home and at school.

"She has four hours of homework every night—don't you think that's too much?"

In middle school, students have as many as seven teachers, and each subject has curriculum goals to be achieved by the end of the year; teachers must assign some work to be completed outside of class. So yes, your teen will have homework, probably more than she has seen in the past; each year she will be responsible for more, not less, work. Instead of questioning the quantity of homework, help your student effectively manage that work.

- Monitor her working time—is that four *uninterrupted* hours, or four hours made up of checking email, reading a page, flipping through television channels, reading another page, wandering to the refrigerator, reading a page, and calling a friend before reading another page? Not only does this make for the eternal homework assignment, but it affects reading comprehension as well. Someone whose concentration wanders will not fare well on a "Have You Read It?" quiz the next day.
- Provide a quiet desk or table where she may work without interruption.
- Remove the television, computer, and cell phone from the child's bedroom, or at the very least, turn them off. Yes, it's convenient when students have their own computers. However, a teen with a computer in her room is isolated from the guidance of her family; if the computer sits in a common area of the house, parents can assist with homework and monitor internet use.
- Buy your teen an agenda or planner and require that she write down all assignments and due dates every day. Help her schedule homework time and plan ahead for major projects.
- Ask if the school offers tutorials after school, or investigate hiring a private tutor. Many high school and college students tutor younger kids for a reasonable price.
- Encourage her to use her time at school. Many teachers provide classtime for students to start their homework or to work on projects; if she is doing something else during this time, she has to do all that work at home.
- If your teen's workload causes *extreme* stress, speak to the school's counselor about reducing the number of honors classes she takes. Advanced classes require more work, and thus more homework. Also, many middle school students sign up for extracurricular sports, electives that require outside commitments and practice, or foreign language classes that count for high school credit. Remember that these activities are enriching if she can juggle them all, but core classes (as well as her emotional well-being) should be your teen's priority.

“Call me the next time he misses an assignment.”

When students fall into a pattern of missing assignments, parents want to help by making sure the work is turned in. This is admirable, but asking a middle school teacher (who has upwards of 150 students) to call you when your child misses one assignment is impractical. Instead, try some of these approaches:

- Choose a day, once a week, to call or email the teacher and check on the status of the week’s assignments. I recommend Thursdays; this way you can use the teachers’ feedback to adjust your child’s weekend plans accordingly. Check with the teachers before you implement this plan, to see when and how it works best, and give them adequate time to respond.
- Require that your child get his agenda signed by his teachers. This means your child, at the end of each period, should bring his completed agenda to the teacher and ask for a signature. Many parents have found it effective to assign daily consequences if the agenda is not signed, and some provide rewards after a successful week, month, or grading period; this puts the responsibility on your child instead of an adult.
- Have your child ask the teacher for a grade printout or written status report.

“Can you give her extra credit to bring up her grade?”

As I tell my students, if they do the work that I assign, they won’t need extra credit. It is not fair for a student to skip assignments along the way, then at the last minute ask a teacher to create, provide, and grade extra work to resurrect her grade. True, sometimes teens behave irresponsibly and miss assignments. But it’s a more effective learning experience if they (and parents) accept the consequences, which may mean a low grade, rather than making excuses or asking for last-minute redemption. Now’s the time for kids to learn this lesson, since the academic stakes are lower at middle school. Sure, it’s disappointing when your child earns a low grade or fails a class, and summer school can be a bummer for teens with more grandiose plans. But letting her accept the consequences--and helping her learn from those mistakes--will teach her how to do better next time.

“He says he didn’t do that.”

Teacher calls home to discuss incident with parent. Parent talks with child. Child denies incident. Parent believes child. Uh oh. Okay parents, listen up. If a teacher takes the time to call you about an incident at school, you can safely believe that she is not making up a story to get your child in trouble; she needs your help to solve a problem. So before believing your child over the teacher, please remember that it’s much more effective when adults work together, not at cross-purposes.

When your teen’s story doesn’t match the teacher’s, ask yourself, what’s the motivation behind his version? Will he get in trouble if the teacher’s account is true? And could this possibility affect the accuracy of his story? Teens test boundaries, leave out crucial details, and fudge the truth sometimes, especially to avoid punishment. Yes, their version (with or without dramatics and tears) often is quite convincing, and I know parents want to trust their kids, but think twice before you buy every word. A parent who believes a child instead of the teacher (in all but the rarest cases) sends a terrible message and undermines the teacher’s authority. Instead of creating more trust, it lets the teen know he can deceive his parents. Be careful of setting dangerous precedents (even unwittingly) by encouraging dishonesty.

“Thank you.”

I love teaching seventh graders. Middle schoolers are energetic, creative, and funny students who can think abstractly and symbolically while still enjoying stickers on good papers. Even so, these years will be dramatic, contentious, and chaotic for all teens and the adults in their lives. But remember, *you* are the parent, the adult. No matter how rude or belligerent your child’s behavior, *you* are still the one with the power to say no, to remove privileges, and to assign consequences. When parents work with the teachers (not against them), and think of the messages they’re sending, teens will eventually come through these years relatively unscathed, and with a greater sense of responsibility and independence.