

Motivation in the Middle

When your tween is motivated to learn, he will reap huge benefits. He'll put more effort into his schoolwork—and get more out of it. And he will be more likely to stick with challenging assignments and to reach his goals. Here's how to boost your child's enthusiasm for learning.



Notice effort

Give your tween kudos for things he can control, like being persistent or spending extra time on homework.

Why: Acknowledging what he did right will encourage him to repeat the behavior. And when you focus on his actions (starting a big project early) rather than his qualities (intelligence), he'll know exactly what to do next time.

How: Instead of saying, "You're such a math whiz," tell him, "You seem to be getting the hang of it. Asking your teacher for help paid off."

You might also begin comments with "I like how..." or "I noticed that you..." For instance, "I like how you took such a creative approach to your paper," or "I noticed you spent a lot of time going over your Chinese vocabulary." Let him overhear you mention his effort to friends or family, too. ("Dylan puts a lot of time into his schoolwork.")

Expect the best

Inspire your middle grader to succeed by setting high, but achievable, expectations.

Why: If your tween knows that education is important to you, she will value it, too. And knowing that you expect her to do her best in school can encourage her to work hard.

How: Treat school as her number-one job. Remind her that she needs to go each day unless she's sick or there's a family emergency. Also, help her set

daily study times, and offer to quiz her or listen to her talk through difficult material.

If she has a test, you might leave her a "Good luck" note before school and then ask how it went when she gets home. Keep up with school news by reading notices and emails. Finally, talk to her about the latest happenings, such as her upcoming speech competition, to show you're interested in what's going on.

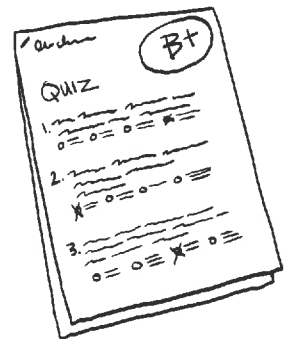
Set small goals

Encourage your child to hit smaller targets on the way to reaching bigger goals.

Why: People are naturally more motivated to strive for something just a bit beyond their reach, since that seems more realistic than making a giant leap. Plus, seeing progress will make your middle grader feel satisfied, much like reaching the next level in a video game.

How: Suggest that he challenge himself to get a little better at something. Maybe he'll work on raising his science quiz scores by 5–10 points. Next, he can aim even higher so that eventually he reaches his overall goal (a B+ average).

Also, give specific feedback. Say he lost points on an essay for grammatical errors. Ask how he could avoid that next time. Then, if his next paper comes home absent those mistakes, have him point out what he did differently. He'll see that taking small steps can yield results that matter.



continued



Find joy

Help your middle grader see that there's joy in learning and that she can make her work more enjoyable.

Why: If your child views what she's doing as valuable, important, or fun, she'll be more likely to get started and enjoy the task. And what she learns will probably be more meaningful and stick with her longer.

How: Talk about the satisfaction you get from your own work. ("I learned a lot in putting together that presentation," or "It felt great to finish organizing the garage.") Then, encourage her to look for ways to make what she's doing more pleasurable—say, quizzing a friend game-show style or making up a dance to remember vocabulary terms.

Plus, help her see how what she's learning connects to her life or to the world. For instance, she might think about which friend a novel's main character reminds her of. Or if she's studying history, she could compare the issues in a past war to a present-day conflict that she read about in the newspaper.

Handle setbacks

Let your tween know it's normal to struggle sometimes—and when he does, he needs to get back up and keep trying.

Why: Your middle schooler may think if he has trouble doing something, he's no good at it and never will be. Realizing that an obstacle is a stepping-stone—not a stopping point—can give him a whole new mindset.

How: Talk about your own struggles, perhaps finding time to stay fit or problems learning new technology. Tell him how you are handling them, including what you have learned ("There are days I just can't get to the gym") and what you will try next ("I'm going to walk at lunch"). He'll get the message that it's normal to hit roadblocks and that they can be overcome.

Encourage him to think in "can do" terms. He might tell himself, "I know I can figure out how to do this science experiment," as opposed to, "I can't figure this out." That will give him the perspective that he needs to keep going.



Wanted: Happy helpers

Your middle grader's room needs cleaning, and her clothes need to be washed. Does she seem to be waiting for the "chore fairy" to magically take care of these things? Help her stop waiting and start cooperating with these ideas:

- Give her a deadline. (Example: "The living room needs to be vacuumed by dinner-time.") Then, let her decide when to fit it in. She might be more motivated after she's had time to relax—and having a sense of control should make her more willing to pitch in.
- Having something to look forward to can make doing a task more appealing. Try



pointing out what she can do once she has finished. After she puts the dishes away, she could invite a friend over or create a new playlist.

- Adding variety to chores may provide fresh energy. Family members might rotate jobs each week. Or maybe you can write the most common ones on index cards and have each person draw one per day.
- Do a job together, like cleaning the kitchen or folding towels. Or work alongside each other doing different things. One of you could match socks while the other one dusts.

Middle Years