



BRIDGING THE GREAT HOMEWORK DIVIDE: A SOLUTIONS GUIDE FOR PARENTS OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

In a recent survey, parents and middle school students reported that they are challenged by the demands of homework. Responses to the survey, titled “The Great Homework Divide,” indicate that students and their parents are struggling to adjust to the middle school workload, which can be both heavier and more varied than previously experienced by these students in a typical elementary school:

- Two-thirds of parents (66 percent) say that their middle school student seeks their help with homework.
- More than half of middle school students (57 percent) and their parents (59 percent) report that parents spend at least one hour a night helping with homework.
- Parents also report helping middle school students with homework, on average, two and one-half nights a week.

In cooperation with LeapFrog Enterprises, Inc., the National Education Association has developed this solutions guide, titled *Bridging the Great Homework Divide: A Solutions Guide for Parents of Middle School Students*, to help parents and middle school students meet the homework challenges they may face.

REASONS FOR HOMEWORK

Teachers assign homework for many reasons—to give students an opportunity to review class lessons, to measure students’ understanding of those lessons, and to help students extend their learning by finding and using new information on a subject. Homework can be an extension of the classroom; it allows students to practice applying skills they have already learned. Homework also can benefit parents because it offers them a chance to learn what their children are expected to accomplish during the school year.

A HEAVIER MIDDLE SCHOOL HOMEWORK LOAD

Frequently, middle school teachers in all subjects assign nightly homework—and some teachers may add longer term projects, such as research papers, projects, and reports. The Great Homework Divide survey found the average sixth grader has 60-90 minutes of homework per night, and seventh and eighth graders can have homework that requires them to devote as much as two hours. More homework from more teachers requires students to develop organizational and planning skills. Parents can play an important role in their children’s success by providing a support system for meeting homework requirements.

STRICTER HOMEWORK POLICIES

Middle school students often face more exacting standards about how homework should be completed and the effect of homework on final grades than they previously experienced in elementary school. Many middle school teachers mandate that assignments be turned in on time and in a specific style or format. It is not uncommon for a teacher in middle school to give zero credit for late homework or to grade down for not following homework guidelines.

It is important for parents and teachers to work as a team when it comes to students' completing homework and receiving a quality public education and lifelong learning experiences. Ensuring students' success is a shared responsibility. We have compiled some tips to help ease the challenges of the homework transition for middle school students and their parents:

1. Be prepared

- **Assume your child will have studying to do every night.** Even if they do not have a specific assignment to complete, establish and maintain regular homework time. If students do not have any homework on a particular night, suggest that they study for upcoming tests, do background research for long term assignments, review notes from class, or read a book.
- **Set up a comfortable location for doing homework.** Students need a distraction-free place to do homework. The kitchen table, provided there is proper lighting, a clean work surface, and a supportive chair, can be an ideal place. If other family members are using this common area, setting up a desk in your child's room may be the answer. You and your child can pick out lighting, a seat cushion, and other accessories together. Avoid letting your child do homework in an environment that is *too* comfortable, such as on a bed or a couch.
- **Make sure your child has the necessary supplies.** Many middle school teachers require specific tools, such as red pens, highlighters, graph paper, calculators, and three-hole punches. They may also expect students to have access to a computer and the Internet, which most school and public libraries make available for everyone's use.
- **Work with your child's outside activity schedule and preferences when setting up a regular homework time.** Many middle school students have an assortment of outside activities that may leave them few opportunities for doing homework. Try to make it easier by establishing a routine homework time. Some children have a better attention span in the afternoon or evening and can order their priorities based on their family schedules.
- **Help your child get organized.** It is a good idea—and often a teacher's requirement—for your child to keep a schedule planner. Encourage your child to write down all assignments daily and even use the planner to maintain a longer-term "to-do" list. Students may enjoy checking off assignments as they are completed, allowing them to easily see the progress they make over time in keeping up with work.

2. Understand teachers' policies and expectations

- **Ensure that your child knows each teacher's homework policy.** Most middle school teachers either hand out a printed summary of homework expectations or post it on the class Web site at the beginning of the school year or semester. Review the expectations together and have your child keep the summary in a personal binder or in a safe, easily accessible place at home.
- **Encourage your child to ask questions.** Some middle school students are nervous about asking their teachers about assignments or instructions they don't understand. Reinforce the notion that teachers want students to ask questions before leaving the classroom or school for the day so that they have the information they need to complete assignments properly.
- **Remind your child to visit teachers if needed.** Teachers often make a point to be in the classroom before school, at lunch, or after school. If students are still having trouble understanding homework assignments, encourage them to take a few minutes to discuss homework questions with the teacher when they can talk one-on-one.

3. Be available and teach by example

- **Make yourself available during homework time.** While you've probably had a long day, just like your child has, and may want to watch a TV show or run errands, it can benefit you both if you are nearby during homework time. You may consider using this time to read, pay bills, or do paperwork that you can easily set aside if your child needs assistance with homework. Once everyone's work is done, maybe that walk outside or favorite family activity can be a treat for you all to share.
- **Stop by and check in while your child does homework, offering your support and advice.** Teachers believe parents are the best source of motivation for students. You may serve as a sounding board

as your child works through interesting ideas or challenging problems.

- **Show interest in schoolwork and discuss what your child is learning.** Although they might not admit it, middle school students still like to know that their parents are interested in what they do. Ask questions about school that day, new homework assignments, or what your child likes or does not like about a particular lesson, class, or subject.
- **Watch for signs of failure or frustration.** If you sense that your child is getting frustrated or discouraged, try to provide guidance without necessarily providing answers. Sometimes suggesting that your child take a short break can be the best advice you can give. Offer to talk through the problem following the break. Your positive attitude about working through frustrations also can be part of the learning process. You will be helping your child to develop a healthy ability to stick with problems until they can be solved.

4. Identify other resources

- **Don't hesitate to line up extra support if needed.** If your child is having regular problems completing the homework for a certain subject, it may be time to schedule a conference with the teacher for you and your child. A teacher may be willing to offer suggestions for tutors or small-group study sessions in your area. Some schools offer peer tutoring, and in some instances local high school students or community members may volunteer as tutors at the middle school.
- **Get to know the guidance counselors and other school employees.** Education support professionals generally know all of the students in the school, and their relationship with your child will continue as they advance from one grade to the next. In addition to teachers, other school employees can be great resources for homework assistance.
- **Encourage your child to find homework buddies.** It is always a good idea for children to identify a homework buddy in each class, someone they can call with questions or if they miss class.
- **Consider providing technology aids to boost homework help.** You may want to take advantage of the many technology-based tools now available. Today's parents can choose from a variety of educational software programs, a vast array of online resources, and even a new technology such as LeapFrog's FLY™ Pentop Computer, which serves as a homework coach for difficult subjects.

5. Stay in touch with your child's teachers

- **E-mail can be an effective way to maintain regular contact with middle school teachers.** The typical middle school teacher has about 150 students, many more than grade school teachers have. While this may limit the time teachers are available to talk with you by phone or meet with you in person, e-mail can be a great way to catch them during their daily breaks and in the evening. Check to see whether your child's teacher has regular access to e-mail.
- **Let teachers know of any significant changes at home.** Especially because they have so many students, middle school teachers need to have all the information possible regarding things that are going on with your family that may affect your child's school performance.
- **Get involved where you can.** Unlike elementary school, parents in middle school are not often requested to help in the classroom. But you can make an effort to participate by offering to assist in the classroom for special projects, to drive and chaperone on field trips, or to share some relevant expertise.

6. Nurture your child's interests

- **Inspire learning outside school.** Children who see opportunities for learning everywhere are more likely to view schoolwork as an extension of their interest in the world, rather than as a burden. If they enjoy sports, encourage them to hunt for articles in the paper or magazines about their favorite teams. If they love the arts, share reviews of movies or plays from newspapers and magazines. If you have a budding scientist, explore local parks and look for interesting plants to identify and study.
- **Find activities that parallel what your child is studying in school.** Learning expands for children who live what they learn in school. If your child is studying a foreign language, check out a popular teen movie in that language from the library or find a cookbook with recipes from that country to prepare together. Visit a museum exhibit on mummies if your child is studying ancient Egypt. Encourage your child to use new math or writing skills to balance an allowance budget or to write a poem or essay for a local contest.