

# Middle School

## Using Skills, Expanding Horizons

Middle school, grades 6 - 8, is a time of great change and transition. Children become teens, with all the accompanying biochemical and physical changes in their bodies. If they were curious and interested in the "world" outside their own home and community before, this interest will sky-rocket during these years.

Besides learning about the world, they are preparing to find their own places in it. Middle school children become more conscious of their own abilities, talents, and interests. They may become more critical of themselves or of others. They are capable of greater responsibilities in household tasks as well as in their own studies.

Here are some suggestions for teaching middle school:

When planning for school, be sure to **ask what your kids like to do**, or are interested in studying, and tailor their schedule to allow time for those topics. You may already have a good idea about their interests, but you may be surprised at some of the things they tell you if you ask. You can also ask if there are any learning methods/types of curriculum they especially like or don't like. This will help you to make plans that will fit best with your middle schoolers' specific personalities, learning styles, and interests.

But remember, it is OK for you, as teacher, to require them to study certain things. Middle school is **a time of exploration**-- basic learning tools (reading, writing, inquiry and research) have been developed, and giving them broad exposure to different topics will actually help them decide what really interests them. So just because your child seems to be a math and science nerd, it doesn't mean you shouldn't have him/her do some watercolor painting or learn irish step dancing. For an imaginative child who loves writing and drawing, you can broaden his/her horizons with a study of logic. Just don't try to do *everything*! Remember, having a relaxed and pleasant day-to-day learning experience is much more valuable than trying to teach dozens of topics in a hectic and crowded manner.

Sometimes you can combine subjects-- for example, using history or science topics for writing compositions or for artwork. Sometimes you can choose to do short term studies on various topics-- lasting 10-12 weeks, instead of a full school year.

Using **research** as a tool for learning becomes a more important focus in middle school. You want them to know how to find information about *anything* they need, without much help from you. The internet age has made this easier in some ways, but more complicated in other ways. Many kids (and adults) go to the internet *first*, in seeking information. It is so easy and

convenient. But there are other good sources of information, such as books, encyclopedias, magazines, and pamphlets. You may have to require that middle school students use these for certain assignments, so they will become familiar with these sources.

One easy way to encourage research skills is to have your middle school child do regular "**fact hunts**." You select the topic or give a few topic choices for your child to pick from. The assignment is to find and write down ten facts about that topic. Allow plenty of time for this-- it will be more enjoyable without time pressure. You can make this the last assignment of the morning or afternoon, to give open-ended time.

Doing fact hunts is different from researching for a report, though the process is very similar. When doing a fact hunt, a child can look for *anything* about the topic, and doesn't need to cover certain questions or subtopics. The facts don't need to be given in any order, writing style, or arrangement (except for being part of a numbered list).

So they don't replace doing other types of research work (such as finding information for reports, or learning to write notes, or learning to research in magazines). They are just a good way to practice and gain skill in doing research in general. They can easily become part of a regular routine if they are done once a week on a certain day.

To encourage independent reading in books that your child might not choose to read on his own, you can have an **assigned book list**, and also **provide time** in the school schedule for him/her **to read** in these books. At least a couple days a week works best, scheduled in an open-ended timeframe (so there's more time to read if the child gets involved in the story and wants to read *more*).

We like having lists of historical fiction novels that middle schoolers read for each grade. These lists can be adapted to go with whatever is being studied that year, if we're doing a group history study. What has been most successful for us is to assign fiction books rather than biographies. Although some biographies are well written and very interesting, some middle schoolers don't like to read them. But biographies often work well for **read-alouds that the kids listen to**, to go with group history studies.

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