A good attitude = more learning

Starting the year with a positive attitude about school goes a long way toward a student’s success. Inspire your tween to develop a winning outlook with these strategies.

Look for positives
Your middle grader can find something interesting about every class. Suggest that he start a list of fun facts, one from each class every week. After a biology lesson on genetics, he might write, “I had a 50 percent chance of having blue eyes since Mom’s are brown and Dad’s are blue.” Encourage him to share his discoveries with you.

Celebrate achievements
Tell your tween to congratulate himself on a job well done. Maybe he earned a higher score on this week’s vocabulary quiz than he did on last week’s. Or perhaps he picked a topic for his history paper, even though he was tempted to put off getting started. Saying “I did it!” will make him feel good about himself and motivated to keep working hard.

Seek help
Successful students know how to get help when they face challenges. For example, your child could post a schedule of teachers’ office hours or homework-help sessions in his locker. Then if he’s struggling, he can sign up for a slot. Having a plan in place will help him stay upbeat.

Fall family fun
Strong parent-tween relationships help kids resist risky behaviors and make family life more enjoyable. Try these ideas.

Outings. Ask your child to find outings that sound fun, such as a fall festival or a paint night. For ideas, she could look in the newspaper or check library and community center websites. Tip: Suggest that she ask classmates where their families like to go on weekends.

Projects. Let your middle grader plan family projects. Perhaps she’ll suggest a garage sale. Work together to gather books, housewares, and toys you don’t need anymore. She can help to advertise the sale, price items, and greet customers.
Wanted: Involved parents

What does parent involvement look like in middle school? While you probably won’t be volunteering in your child’s classroom, she still wants your support (even if she doesn’t act like she does). Consider these tips for being a partner in her education.

Getting started with community service

Q A My son is required to complete community service hours this year, but he can’t decide what to do. How can I help him?

A Doing community service will let your son help others and gain work experience. The main office or his school counselor may have a list of places where he can volunteer. He could also ask friends, relatives, and neighbors for ideas.

Then, suggest that he choose a job that matches his interests—he’ll get more out of it that way. For example, he might participate in a beach cleanup if he’s concerned about the environment. Or if he likes working with younger children, he may play games or read with little ones at a homeless shelter while their parents attend job training.

Finally, encourage him to keep track of his work, including names of supervisors, so he’ll receive credit—and even have references for a job someday.

Everyday engineering

From shoes and clothing to appliances and electronics, just about every product your tween uses was designed by engineers. Help him discover how engineering affects his daily life with this activity.

1. Encourage your child to consider the engineering involved in his favorite products. Maybe his running shoes absorb impact, the smoothie maker purees big chunks of fruit, or his jacket repels rain.

2. Now let him pick a product to redesign. He could decide to add another layer of foam to his shoes. First, he should run a block and rate his comfort on a scale of 1–10. Then, he can add foam, run another block, and rate his comfort again. What happens if he adds even more foam? How much might be too much?

Parent to Parent

The “elevator speech”

When I was looking for a job, I discovered an interesting technique for “selling” yourself in an interview: the “elevator speech.” I shared the idea with my daughter Susan, thinking she could use it to write summaries or make points during class discussions.

I told Susan to pretend she was going to ride an elevator with me and summarize the novel she’s reading in 30 seconds or less—about the time it would take to ride from the ground to the top floor of a building.

Susan jotted down what she wanted to say. At first, it took her almost 3 minutes to read it. But she kept trimming her summary until it was about 30 seconds long.

Then, she read it aloud to me. She got to the point quickly, and now she plans to try the strategy in class.