As the school year gets underway, your middle grader will be calmer and more confident if she knows she’s on top of things. Strategies like these can help her get organized.

Create “command centers”
Encourage your tween to keep school-related materials in specific places so she’ll always know where they are. She could store homework supplies on a kitchen shelf or in a box on her bedroom desk. Have her choose a spot near the front door for items like her backpack, musical instrument, and gym shoes so they’ll be ready to go when she is.

Use “5-minute wonders”
Suggest these habits that take only a few minutes. Before leaving school each day, she can scan her planner to check dates and deadlines for tests, assignments, and forms. That way, she’ll know which books and papers to take home. At home, she could quickly leaf through her folders and notebooks, then file what she needs and throw away what she doesn’t.

Keep an estimate log
Knowing how long tasks actually take will give your tween an edge when organizing her time. Suggest that she time herself completing different types of schoolwork, such as doing research for a report or reviewing Spanish vocabulary. She could write the times in her planner and refer to them later to help her budget accurately in the future.

Part of the group
Joining an extracurricular activity gives your child a productive—and fun—way to spend his free time. Try these ideas.

■ Find a good fit. Suggest that your middle grader listen to morning announcements or check the school website for a list of activities. He can ask the coach or advisor for more details about ones he’s interested in.

■ Arrange transportation. Set up a carpool with other parents. Or have him find out whether there’s a late bus he can ride and get the schedule.

■ Show interest. If he joins a sports team, cheer him on at games or meets. Or if he’s in the science club, ask him to tell you about an experiment he enjoyed.

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Homework: Smooth sailing

In middle school, your tween is the captain of the ship when it comes to handling homework. He can sail smoothly with these tips.

Discuss expectations. Encourage your child to think about what he expects of himself. He might say he will turn in assignments when they’re due and get in the habit of looking over math problems to be sure he didn’t make careless mistakes. Also, let him know what you expect when it comes to homework. Consider writing down your expectations, such as doing his best and turning assignments in when they’re due.

Step back. Have your middle grader decide when to do homework, whether it’s after school or after dinner. When it’s time for him to start, be matter-of-fact.

You could say, “Looks like it’s time to do homework. Let me know if you need anything.” Then, allow him to work independently. This shows him you have confidence in his abilities and encourages him to take responsibility for his own work.

What is “vaping”?

The good news: Fewer middle schoolers are smoking cigarettes. The bad news: More tweens are vaping, or using electronic cigarettes. Here’s what you need to know.

What it is: Electronic devices are used to inhale vapor that usually contains nicotine. Vaping appeals to kids because it comes in flavors like cotton candy or bubble gum. The devices are often small and easy to hide—some even look like flash drives and can be plugged into laptops to charge.

Why it’s dangerous: Nicotine is addictive, and it harms growing brains and lungs. And the verdict is still out on what additional damage the chemicals could cause.

What you can do: Don’t allow any type of smoking, and let your child know the consequences if she breaks this rule. Also, be on the lookout for signs of vaping, such as giant clouds of vapor or unexplained odors. And search for images of e-cigarettes online so you’ll know what they look like.

In school every day

Q & A

Q Last year, my son asked to stay home when he was tired or “needed a break.” I know he has a lot to do—should I let him stay home occasionally?

A One of the best ways to help your child have a successful year is to make sure he attends school every day from start to finish.

Start the year by reading the attendance policy in the school handbook together. That way, you’ll both be on the same page about what counts as an acceptable reason for missing school, such as illness or a family emergency.

Then if he asks for a “day off,” explain that learning is his job. To keep up with new material and participate in class, he has to be there. You can let him know that his days off come during winter break and spring break. Regular attendance at school now will create a habit that he’ll continue throughout his school years—and one day, on the job.