

# CLASSROOM

## connection

## Go team! Teaching teamwork

**Helping students learn to work well with others has long been a goal of education. Today, this "soft" skill is more important than ever.** Learning to work well as part of a group puts students in good stead as they head toward high school, where collaboration and presentation are becoming more common ways for students to learn and to show what they know. This "soft" skill also will be an asset as students enter college and then workplaces that require people to work in creative ways on a variety of projects and with many different colleagues, who are perhaps from different countries.

### FINDING COMMON GROUND

Fortunately, much of what students experience during the middle school years can help them become better team players. More and more, teachers design lessons and projects that allow students to work toward a common goal. Middle students also are offered the opportunity to participate in many co-curricular activities. When it comes to team-building, teachers and social workers say that sports, intramurals, academic and social clubs, music and art are as valuable as students' in-class experiences.

Following are some examples of the intentional and more subtle ways teamwork is taught each day in middle:

### Academics

*None of us is as smart as all of us.*—Japanese proverb

Frequently, today's students are asked to work together in teams to tackle learning challenges and projects. This may seem like a familiar concept to parents who worked with lab

partners in earth science class to identify rocks.

However, today's teamwork is no longer limited to the science lab. In fact, many of today's group projects require students to weave together what they have learned in all of their classes. For example, students might be studying ancient Egypt in social studies, learning how to calculate the size and scale of pyramids in math class, and writing a research paper on Egyptian culture for English.

Group learning has become decidedly high-tech, too. Consider this modern earth science project about our solar system:

► **Working in a group**, students brainstorm what they know about Earth and the other planets in our solar system. They record what they've come up with, either on paper or into such spreadsheet programs as Excel. Students may be assigned roles as reporter (one who summarizes the group's findings for the class), questioner (one who encourages quiet group members to participate in the discussion and prevents highly verbal members from dominating the conversation), recorder (one who records the group's ideas and writes up a report for the presenter) and time and materials manager (one who helps group members stay focused on the assignment, complete it on time and reminds the group to move forward to the next question or task when time is running short).

► **Students verify** what they think is true at Space.com and NASA's Web site.

► **Using library resources**, students dip into history to learn about the origins of astronomy and about the tools and struc-

"Today's economy is vastly different from 50 years ago, fueled now by brains rather than brawn. In order to survive, businesses need individuals who possess a wide range of high-level skills and abilities, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork and decision-making."

—Excerpt from *Why Business Cares About Education* by the Business Coalition for Education Reform.



tures designed long ago to study the planets. If working solo, students report their findings (orally or in writing) to their larger work groups.

► **Using such computer software as *Starry Night Backyard***, students can take a virtual tour of the stars and planets in the night sky.

► **Once the groups have thoroughly researched the solar system**, they join together with other teams to create a class Powerpoint presentation detailing all of their findings.

### Sports and intramurals

*The strength of the team is each individual member...the strength of each member is the team.*

—Los Angeles Lakers' coach Phil Jackson

*I am a member of a team, and I rely on the team, I defer to it and sacrifice for it, because the team, not the individual, is the ultimate champion.*

—U.S. soccer star Mia Hamm

Without a doubt, sports teams and intramural games can teach powerful lessons about working together for the common good. Rarely is a run scored or game won without the combined efforts of all players—those on the field, as well as those who cheer on a team on from the sidelines and bleachers.

### Performances (music, dance and theater)

*I love to hear a choir. I love the humanity...to see the faces of real people devoting themselves to a piece of music. I like the teamwork. It makes me feel optimistic about the human race when I see them cooperating like that.*

—Beatle Paul McCartney

An orchestra performance requires students to practice, attend rehearsals and take their lead from the conductor. A theatrical performance includes teachers, student actors, scenery and costume designers, stage managers, publicity and promotion folks and parents all pulling together to create a really great show.

### Clubs and activities

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*

—Margaret Meade, anthropologist and writer

Whether creating the school yearbook or raising funds to buy warm blankets for soldiers in Iraq, school-based clubs and activities require that students pool their creative resources and energy for the greater good.

# Parent advice to help your children learn

Educational research has made it clear that parents who are actively involved in their children's learning at home help their children become more successful learners in and out of school. During the early adolescent years, adult guidance is especially important.

Here are some reading, writing, math, social studies and health Home Learning Recipe activities. These have been developed by the Home and School Institute. Parents of middle schoolers find them to be easy and enjoyable ways to work with the school — using materials they have at home to build their children's skills. These activities will also help preteens and parents talk together about matters they both care about, which improves family communication at this crucial time.

## READING ACTIVITIES

**Read All About It** — Introduce your child to the many kinds of information in the daily newspaper. Ask your child to find the pages containing news about government leaders, editor's opinions, weather reports, car sales, house and apartment rentals, and want ads. Discuss how to use this information.

**Follow the News** — As a family, choose an important news event to follow for a day or two. Ask each person to find as much information on the topic as possible—read newspapers, listen to the radio, watch TV news. Then talk about what everyone learned.

## WRITING ACTIVITIES

**Nice Words** — Make someone happy. Write each family member's name on separate sheets of paper. Add a note or a drawing—for example, "I like the way you make breakfast," or "You make me happy when you do the dishes." Fold the paper and put them in a bag. Ask each person to choose a paper from the bag. Place the notes where they can be found by family members. And watch for the smiles!

**Looking at Advertisements** — Take a closer look. Help your children improve their thinking and writing skills by looking carefully at newspaper, magazine, and TV advertisements. What is the main point of the ad? What details does it use to communicate its message? For example, a strong, handsome man holding a soft drink in an expensive car with a beautiful woman at his side is telling us something about the soft drink.

**Pro and Con: What Do You Think?** — Make a family game of discussing a special issue—for example, "Teenagers should be allowed to vote," or "There should never be any homework." Ask

your youngsters to think of all the reasons they can to support their views. Then, ask them to think of reasons against their views. Which views are most convincing? For variety, assign family members to teams and have teams prepare their arguments pro and con.

## MATH ACTIVITIES

**How Much Does It Cost?** — Put math skills to work. Help your children understand living costs by discussing household expenses with them. For example, make a list of monthly bills—heat, electricity, telephone, mortgage or rent. Fold the paper to hide the costs and ask your youngsters to guess the cost of each item. Unfold the paper. How do the estimates compare with the actual costs? Were they close?

**Math Marks** — Are they really necessary? Ask your children to look through the newspaper to find and list as many percentages and decimal numbers as possible—sale prices, sports scores, bank rates. Ask what would happen without those marks?

**Living Within Our Means** — Teach children who have allowances or regular spending money how to budget. Ask them to make a two-column list of expenses and income. Under expenses, they list what they expect to spend for movies, bus tokens, lunches, etc. Then, have your youngsters add all the expenses and subtract the total from the income. Ask them to think of ways to reduce their spending. If their income is more than their expenses, talk about a savings plan.

## SOCIAL STUDIES ACTIVITIES

**Expanding Horizons** — Help your child learn about people from different countries. Suggest talking to neighbors from foreign countries, reading library books about other cultures, reading newspapers, and watching TV specials. Let Your Voice Be Heard—Promote good citizenship. Help your child write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper about an issue affecting children. For example, suggest that a bike path be built near the school or that a city event be planned for youngsters. Children are citizens and their ideas are worth hearing.

## HEALTH ACTIVITY

**Stretch, Run, Bike** — Ask your child to do at least one kind of exercise every day. For example, run or walk briskly for 10 minutes. Walk, when possible, instead of riding, for any distance less than a mile. Have your youngster make a week-long exercise plan. Try to think of a modest reward for sticking to the plan and exercise right along with your child.

**Remember** — keep the talk flowing. It's the stuff high test scores are made of and it's the basis for parent/child closeness.

Think of these as starter activities to get your ideas going. There are opportunities everywhere for teaching and learning.

**TAKE A LITTLE TIME TO DO A LOT OF GOOD!**

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