

Helping Students Learn[®]

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School
Cumberland County Schools



March 2026

Let your teen take the lead in fulfilling school responsibilities

Sometimes, wanting the best outcome for your teen makes it hard to let go of control. But in the high school years, it's essential to let your teen take responsibility for academics.

Studies show that when families assume the majority of responsibility for their students' performance in school, academics can suffer and the teens are more likely to become anxious or depressed.



To encourage responsibility for learning, put your teen in charge of:

- **Assignments.** Make it clear you expect your teen to turn all schoolwork in on time. Share time management strategies, then let your teen put them into action. Review progress once every day or two, rather than every hour.
- **Solving school problems.** Questions about a grade? Your teen should talk to the teacher. Failed a test? Your student should work with the teacher to create a plan for raising the grade.

It is still important for you to be aware of what your teen is learning in school and to get involved when problems arise that your teen can't solve independently. But if you hear yourself talking about "our science project," it's time to take a step back.

Source: K. Reed and others, "Helicopter Parenting and Emerging Adult Self-Efficacy: Implications for Mental and Physical Health," *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, Springer US.



Pleasure reading is worth the time

Even if your teen does a lot of reading for classes, reading for pleasure is beneficial. Students who enjoy what they are reading typically read faster and understand more of what they read. Their vocabularies and background knowledge grow. And these benefits carry over into school-related reading.

To encourage pleasure reading:

- **Set an example.** Then, share reading you enjoy with your teen.
- **Read together.** Get two copies of a book and discuss how it relates to your lives.
- **Suggest audiobooks.** Books that are challenging to read alone can come to life when they are read aloud. Your teen will be exposed to new vocabulary and hear fluent reading. Encourage listening while exercising, riding in the car or just relaxing.
- **Emphasize the ability to choose.** If a book is boring or too hard, your teen can just try another title. The point is to enjoy the time spent reading.

Limit social media's sting

Social media has become an important way teens maintain friendships. But it can also have negative effects on their mental health. To strike a healthy balance, help your teen:

- **Control content.** Suggest following inspiring people, like a favorite author, and unfollowing people who make your teen feel sad or anxious.
- **Remember that** no one's life is ideal. People usually post more about their good times than their bad ones.
- **Take breaks** from social media for an evening, a day or a weekend.



Source: A. Zsila and M. Reyes, "Pros & cons: impacts of social media on mental health," *BMC Psychology*, Springer.

Help your teen bounce back

Student life comes with disappointments, from poor grades to cancelled plans. When your teen is facing a letdown, ask, "How are you feeling about it?" Offer sympathy, but don't try to fix things. Instead, say, "I know you are sad the event was called off. What else do you think you could do?"



Be alert for substance abuse

Recognizing the signs of substance abuse is vital for addressing this life-or-death problem. If you notice several of the following signs, your teen may be at risk of abuse:

- **Social issues**—feeling friendless, hanging out with kids who behave rashly, etc.
- **Sudden academic problems.**
- **Visible evidence**—vapes, beer cans, etc.
- **Lack of caring** about things that once were important to your teen.
- **Unusual money-related events**—disappearing money at home, or your teen having more money than usual.



College rejection is affecting my teen. What should I do?

Q: My senior dreamed of going to a certain college, but didn't get in. A friend was accepted, however, and my teen is crushed. How can I help my student move on and focus on the schools that said yes?

A: It's a painful truth that many students won't be admitted to their top-choice schools. But it is also true there is no such thing as the "only perfect school" for any student. To help your teen refocus:

- **Acknowledge** your teen's feelings.
- **Share some facts.** The number of college applicants is on the rise, which means there is more competition for admittance to selective schools. Also, schools consider many factors when selecting students. Your teen's friend may have an unusual talent that fills a need.
- **Offer reassurance.** Your teen will have a chance to grow personally and academically at any college.
- **Help your teen explore** the other schools. Visit, if possible. Most colleges have programs for admitted students (some may also be online). Encourage your teen to attend with an open mind.

In a year, your teen may be able to transfer to that dream school. But by then, it's likely the school your teen chooses now will feel like home.



Are you fostering open communication?

Teens don't always share personal information with their families. But knowing what's going on in your student's life is important for supporting school success. Are you encouraging communication? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

1. **Do you spend** some time each day doing things with your teen—even if it's preparing dinner or driving somewhere? This is when communication happens most naturally.
5. **Do you pause** often when talking together to give your teen time to respond?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are creating opportunities for communication between you and your teen. For each no, try that idea.

2. **Do you make** time to talk when your teen comes to you with a problem? If you can't do it in the moment, set a time when you can.
3. **Do you require** your teen to inform you of social plans and update you if plans change?
4. **Do you tell** stories about positive and memorable things your teen did as a little kid?

"To listen well is as powerful a means of communication and influence as to talk well."

—John Marshall

Enhance study power

Students who don't know how to study effectively may spend more time doing it than they need to, or get so frustrated they stop completely. Encourage your teen to:

1. **Eliminate distractions**, like unneeded digital devices, hunger and thirst, before sitting down to study.
2. **Review class notes** each evening.
3. **Study in several** short sessions, spaced out over time, rather than one long one.
4. **Alternate content types.** After studying a math formulas, switch to English before going on to science formulas.
5. **Stay on task.** Your teen can jot worries or random thoughts on paper to deal with later and then get back to studying.

Enforce rules consistently

When adults are inconsistent, teens think rules are merely suggestions. To teach your teen to take rules seriously:

- **Agree** with your teen's other parent(s) on rules and consequences. Make it clear they apply wherever your teen is staying.
- **Uphold school rules** and expectations for students.

Discuss ways to be kind

Research shows that people who are kind to others are happier, and that happy students tend to earn better grades. Talk with your high schooler about ways to be:

- **Considerate.** Your teen can take classmates' needs into account and participate fairly.
- **Caring.** Your teen can smile and reach out to a student who seems upset.
- **Forgiving.** Kind people focus on solutions rather than blame.



Source: O. Curry and others, "Happy to Help?" *Open Science Framework*, Center for Open Science.

Helping Students Learn®

Published in English and Spanish, September through May.

Publisher: Doris McLaughlin.

Publisher Emeritus: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.

Editor: Alison McLean.

Translations Editor: Victoria Gaviola.

Copyright © 2026, The Parent Institute®, a division of PaperClip Media, Inc.

P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474
1-800-756-5525 • www.parent-institute.com