

Family Guides: Supporting Learning in the 2020-21 School Year

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

These days, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, students are often learning at home. It's a challenge for all of us. Parents, family members, grandparents, and other caregivers are all pitching in to help students learn. So, we include all those important people when we talk about how families can support middle schoolers' learning in this guide.

Families want to know more about what their kids are learning in school, so they can support them. In the early grades, they are usually able to offer help if kids get stuck. As students get older, the content gets more challenging. Suddenly, parents and caregivers can feel like they don't have much help to offer. But that's not the case. Research confirms that families still have a big role to play in helping students learn. It's just a different role.

How can families be supportive? In addition to providing encouragement, a study of more than 50,000 students found that relating what middle and high school kids are learning in school to their future life goals is one of the most effective ways families can help.¹ What doesn't work? Trying to be directly involved with schoolwork. It can feel to middle and high school students like you're interfering or even confusing them. And this IS the time to encourage students to take more responsibility and be more independent; helping kids take charge of their learning is important.

This guide was developed so students and their families can understand the most important literacy and math content and skills students should learn at each grade level. Of course, students will be learning in other academic subjects too, but literacy and math are the important building blocks for everything else.

¹Harvard Graduate School of Education (2009). Hill: Parents need to link schoolwork to future goals. <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/09/05/hill-parents-need-link-schoolwork-future-goals>.



GRADE 6

THIS GUIDE INCLUDES

- **What 6th Graders Are Learning** – What experts say is the most important content (knowledge and skills) for students to learn in literacy and math by the end of sixth grade.
- **Talking About Literacy and Math with Your 6th Grader** – Ways families can talk with their 6th grader about what they are learning in school, find related resources, and connect learnings to the world around them.
- **Education Words** – Sometimes, you'll hear educators use a word that has a specific meaning in schools. Those words are bolded. Understanding those terms will help you speak the same language.
- **Tips for Talking with Teachers** – How you and your child's teachers can work together to help students grow.
- **Connecting Classrooms to Careers** – Helping your middle schooler see the connection between classroom learning and their future.
- **Tools and Resources to Help** – We've chosen a few internet resources that best match each grade's content.



STUDENT
ACHIEVEMENT
PARTNERS



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LITERACY

WHAT 6TH GRADERS ARE LEARNING



Throughout the school year, 6th grade students will spend the most time working on the following topics. They should understand them well by the end of the year.

Reading, writing, speaking, and listening:

- ☐ Reading grade level texts smoothly and with expression, at a fluency rate of around 110-160 words per minute by the end of the year.
- ☐ Asking and answering questions about stories and texts read independently. Summarizing what happened in what was read and citing specific evidence to show how they know. Questioning the author's or speaker's assumptions. Determining the accuracy of statements they have heard or read.
- ☐ Analyzing the author's specific word choice to understand how it impacts the meaning or tone of the text. Determining or clarifying the meaning of unknown words, **synonyms**, **antonyms**, and **figures of speech** (for example, "cause and effect," "part and whole," "item and category"). Determining or clarifying the meaning of words with similar, but not identical, meanings (for example, "stingy," "scrimping," "economical," "thrifty"). This can be done based on how they are used in context, through word relationships, or by using tools like dictionaries or glossaries.
- ☐ Making and justifying a claim or line of argument in writing or discussion. Supporting claims with precise and relevant evidence from credible sources.
- ☐ Showing something new they have learned from a text or about a topic. This can be in any form – speaking and conversation, letters, journals, stories, diagrams, reports, or essays – and should include sufficient additional detail that fits the form they have chosen.
- ☐ Writing in response to text, including an introduction and **thesis statement**; examples that are linked, logically ordered, and grouped; a conclusion; and mostly accurate spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.



TALKING ABOUT LITERACY WITH YOUR 6TH GRADER

- If your 6th grader's reading is choppy, or they sound out every word, fluency might be an issue. Have them practice reading and re-reading a poem, short story, or passage to focus on expression and rate.
- Turn on closed captioning while watching TV to allow your 6th grader to read along with the dialogue.
- Encourage your 6th grader to choose a book they want to read on their own each day. Reading lots of books over time is more important than the type of text. Let your child pick based on their interests and what makes them excited to read.
- Pick a topic to learn about together. Read books, look online, or do short research projects together. Ask what they learned in their reading. Have them share with you, with friends, or with other family members.
- Encourage regular writing: keeping a journal, writing letters or emails, and/or taking notes on what they are learning. Encourage your 6th grader to write to you, and then write back to them.
- Listen to podcasts together, or encourage your 6th grader to listen to podcasts of their choice and tell you about what they cover. There is a wide range of podcasts available. Consider the following sampling for a range of topics and types: "[But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids](#)," "[Code Switch](#)," and "[The Unexplainable Disappearance of Mars Patel](#)."



MATHEMATICS

WHAT 6TH GRADERS ARE LEARNING



Throughout the school year, 6th grade students will spend the most time working on the following topics. They should understand them well by the end of the year.

- Understanding ratios and rates, and solving problems involving **proportional relationships**. (For example, “If it took 7 hours to mow 4 lawns, then at that rate, how many lawns could be mowed in 35 hours? At what rate were lawns being mowed?”)
- Dividing fractions and solving word problems related to dividing fractions. (For example, “You are making granola. One batch of granola requires $\frac{2}{3}$ cup of nuts. How many batches can be made with 4 cups of nuts?”)
- Using positive and negative numbers together to describe quantities. Understanding the ordering and **absolute values** of positive and negative numbers. Representing points in the **coordinate plane** that have positive and negative coordinates.
- Reading, writing, and manipulating algebra **expressions** by applying knowledge of how numbers work (for example, when adding numbers, the order doesn’t matter, so $x + y = y + x$). Emphasizing **equivalent expressions** and using properties of addition and multiplication to rewrite them (for example, $24x + 18y$ can be rewritten as $6(4x + 3y)$ or $y + y + y$ as $3y$).
- Understanding and using the process of solving simple equations (those with one unknown quantity or variable like $7x = 22$).
- Writing equations to solve word problems and describe relationships between quantities. (For example, the distance (D) traveled by a train over a period of time (T) might be expressed by an equation $D = 85T$, where D equals the distance in miles, and T equals the time in hours. This equation could be used to find the time required for the train to travel 100 miles or to find the distance the train would travel in 1.5 hours.)



TALKING ABOUT MATH WITH YOUR 6TH GRADER

- Encourage your 6th grader to talk to you about the math they feel they can successfully do. What new concepts are they learning? Where do they feel they need additional challenge and/or support?
- Help your 6th graders find resources that they feel are relevant and helpful. Suggest that they talk to their teachers about the resources, extensions, and practice activities they find.
- Have your child name topics of study that are directly relevant to their world. For example, in Grade 6, where do they see negative numbers besides their math materials?
- Encourage your 6th grader to think about jobs they might like to have when they are an adult. Help them learn about how math is a part of these jobs.





EDUCATION WORDS



Sometimes, you'll hear educators use a word that has a specific meaning in schools. Understanding those terms will help you speak the same language!

Absolute value

The distance a number is from zero. The symbol "I" is placed on either side of a number to mean absolute value, so we write $| -7 | = 7$.

Antonyms

Antonyms are words that mean the opposite. "Big" and "little" are antonyms.

Coordinate plane

A coordinate plane (<https://www.splashlearn.com/math-vocabulary/geometry/coordinate-plane>) is a two-dimensional (<https://www.splashlearn.com/math-vocabulary/geometry/two-dimensional>) plane formed by the intersection of a vertical number line called y-axis and a horizontal number line called x-axis. These are perpendicular lines that intersect each other at zero, and this point is called the origin (<https://www.splashlearn.com/math-vocabulary/geometry/origin>).

Equivalent expressions

Equivalent expressions are expressions that work the same even though they look different. If two algebraic expressions are equivalent, then the two expressions have the same value when we plug in the same value(s) for the variable(s). For example, $2x + x + x$ is equivalent to $4x$.

Expression

Numbers, symbols, and operators (such as + and x) grouped together that show the value of something. For example, $y + 4$ is an expression, and $3 - x/2$ is also an expression.

Figures of speech

A figure of speech is a word or phrase meant to create meaning that is separate from the literal definition. A figure of speech might be used to describe, compare, exaggerate, or emphasize something to convey meaning.

Proportional relationships

A relationship between two varying quantities in which one quantity is a constant multiple of another quantity. For example, in an ant farm, the total number of legs is six times the total number of ants, so in an ant farm the number of legs is proportional to the number of ants.

Reading level

Teachers often determine the grade level at which a student is reading. But sometimes, students are then limited to reading texts at that level (typically a letter or number). This practice is one to be wary of, particularly if students are limited to reading only texts that are below the grade level goals.

Synonyms

Synonyms are words that mean the same thing. "Big" and "enormous" are synonyms.

Thesis statement

A thesis statement is one or two sentences that summarize the paper's main point, main idea, or main message.



TIPS FOR TALKING WITH TEACHERS

Literacy

- What are my 6th grader's strengths, and how do you use them in instruction?
- How do you select texts? Will my 6th grader see characters and topics that represent them, their background, and their identity? Will they learn new perspectives and about new and diverse characters through the texts you use in the classroom?
- What topics are 6th graders learning about through reading? What should my 6th grader be able to understand, write, and talk about as a result of what they have read? Topics in history? Topics in science?
- What opportunities does my 6th grader have to choose books that interest them? Are they limited to a specific **reading level**? How are you supporting any reading needs they have both within grade level text and with texts that they read on their own?
- Is my 6th grader able to write in ways that show you they understand what they are reading and learning? Are they able to use evidence from the text, present their responses in detail, and write with sufficient depth? Do they use conventions (spelling, punctuation, capitalization) and grammar rules appropriately? If not, what challenges are they facing? How can I help?
- Is my 6th grader able to speak and listen in class discussions and conversations in ways that show you they understand what they are reading and learning? Do they use evidence from the text, present their responses in detail, and speak with sufficient depth? If not, what challenges are they facing?
- How can I support and encourage my 6th grader to build a strong relationship with you and take age-appropriate responsibility for their own learning?

Math

- What topics are 6th graders learning about in math this year?
- Ask for specific updates on how your 6th grader is progressing in their understanding of the key content of the grade.
- What should my 6th grader be able to understand and talk about as a result of what they have learned?
- Is my 6th grader able to demonstrate to you that they understand what they are learning? If not, what challenges are they facing?
- How can I support and encourage my 6th grader to build a strong relationship with you and take age-appropriate responsibility for their own learning?



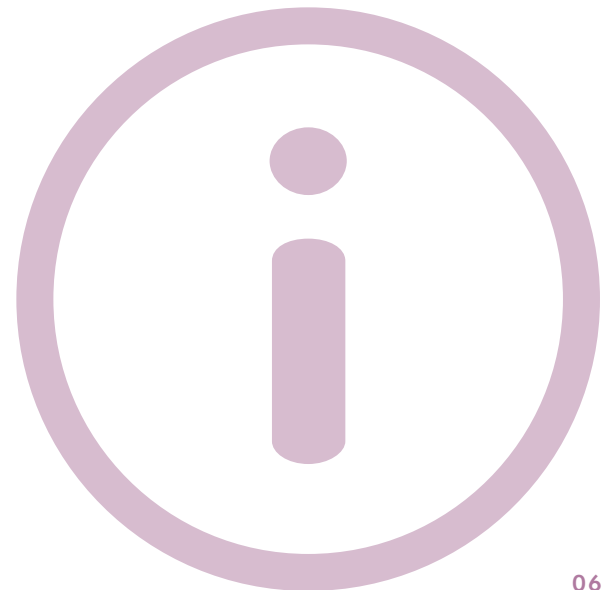


CONNECTING CLASSROOMS TO CAREERS



Helping middle schoolers see how what they are learning in school connects to their future is one of the best ways that families can support their kids. In addition to seeking out resources at school and in your community (community colleges are a great place to look), here are a few more ways to get started:

- Help your middle schooler think about what jobs they might like to have, and then learn more about the education and training they need for a career in that field.
<https://www.careerzone.ny.gov/views/careerzone/stem/index.jsf>
- Does your middle schooler like building and fixing things? Helping people? Learn more about how interests could lead to a career.
<https://www.bls.gov/k12/students/careers/career-exploration.htm>
- Have your middle schooler visit/"shadow" someone who works in a career in which they are interested. Here are some virtual site visits to get started.
<https://www.nebraskacareerclusters.com/>
- Has your middle schooler expressed interest in a career in the military? Explore military careers here.
<https://www.asvabprogram.com/>
- Find a pathway to success: A guide to help students learn how to translate their interests into one of 16 career clusters.
<https://ed.sc.gov/instruction/career-and-technical-education/career-guidance/career-cluster-guides/>
- Learn the importance of math for careers and jobs: What teens need to know and how parents can help.
<https://www.niu.edu/mathmatters/careers-jobs/index.shtml>
- Are there colleges your middle schooler has expressed interest in attending? Together, check out their admissions requirements, including their course-taking requirements. Make sure your student is prepared for (mostly in middle school) and taking (mostly in high school) the classes they need not just to graduate from high school but to be eligible for college admission.





TOOLS AND RESOURCES TO HELP



Literacy

Sources of fiction text for reading and writing:

- 36 Great Short Stories to Teach in Middle School
<https://www.weareteachers.com/best-short-stories-for-middle-schoolers/>
- 24 Must Share Poems for Middle and High School
<https://www.weareteachers.com/24-must-share-poems-for-middle-school-and-high-school/>

Sources of non-fiction text for reading, writing, and research:

- *The New York Times* Learning Network
<https://www.nytimes.com/section/learning>
- Dogo News
<https://www.dogonews.com/grade/grades-6-8>
- *PBS NewsHour* Extra: Student Voices
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/student-voices/>

More tools:

- Text sets to learn about any subject
<https://achievethecore.org/content/upload/Text%20Set%20Guidance.pdf>
- Passages to help build fluency
<https://achievethecore.org/page/887/fluency-packet-for-the-6-8-grade-band>



Math

- Parent roadmap: What should children be learning in 6th Grade? How can families support their learning?
<https://www.cgcs.org/Page/244>
- Videos and tutorials to help 6th graders understand and practice writing **expressions** with variables
<https://www.khanacademy.org/math/cc-sixth-grade-math/cc-6th-expressions-and-variables>
- A game to learn about positive and negative values on an XY graph
<http://toytheater.com/popcorn/>
- Activities and games to help students practice ratios, **coordinate planes**, and other topics in Grade 6 math
<https://teacher.desmos.com/collection/5e72b4b9feeb100f56bcac4f>
- Mathematics tasks that illustrate Grade 6 math content
<https://achievethecore.org/category/416/mathematics-tasks?&g%5B%5D=6&sort=name>
- Examining the nutritional value of fast food to determine how long it takes to “burn off” certain foods
<https://www.mathalicious.com/lessons/newtritional-info>
- A readiness check to find out how your 6th grader is doing
<https://bealearninghero.org/readiness-check/>
- Tasks for a variety of math topics at the 6th grade level
<https://tasks.illustrativemathematics.org/>