

Critical and Creative Thinking

Did you know that being a good thinker can help your middle grader do better in school, make good decisions, and deal with life's challenges? If he knows how to evaluate information and think creatively, he'll be better able to apply what he learns and handle everyday problems. Try these eight activities to practice thinking skills.



1. Maintain crowd control

Your tween will need to use logical thinking and good old-fashioned teamwork for this challenge. Have family members stand on a blanket or in an area sectioned off with rope. Then, gradually shrink the space (say, by folding part of the blanket or moving the rope a little at a time). They will have to keep arranging themselves in different ways to stay inside the space. How small can the area get before they no longer fit?

2. He's more like...



Ask your child to decide whether family members or friends are more like one thing than another. For example, is his brother Josh more like a family car, a sports car, or an all-terrain vehicle? He will have to consider people's personalities and the options to choose an answer. Once

he does, he can explain his thinking. He might say Josh is always zooming here and there, so he reminds him of a sports car, while his friend Allen is like an all-terrain vehicle because he loves adventure.

3. Measure without numbers

Have your tween get different-sized containers to measure out exactly 4 oz. of water. For example, could she measure 4 oz. using 3-oz., 6-oz., and 8-oz. containers? How about using just a 3-oz. and a 5-oz. container? What creative ways can she come up with to get the correct amount of water? Give her a measuring cup to check her results. *Idea:* Can she find a combination of containers that makes it impossible to measure 4 oz.?



Fast forward: Why it counts

Picture your child in the workplace 10–15 years from now. Will she have what it takes to thrive? Being a good thinker and problem solver will go a long way toward helping her succeed.

Critical thinkers think for themselves. They look at and evaluate information to reach a logical conclusion or make an informed choice. This skill will let your tween analyze everything from math problems in school to marketing opportunities in a future job.

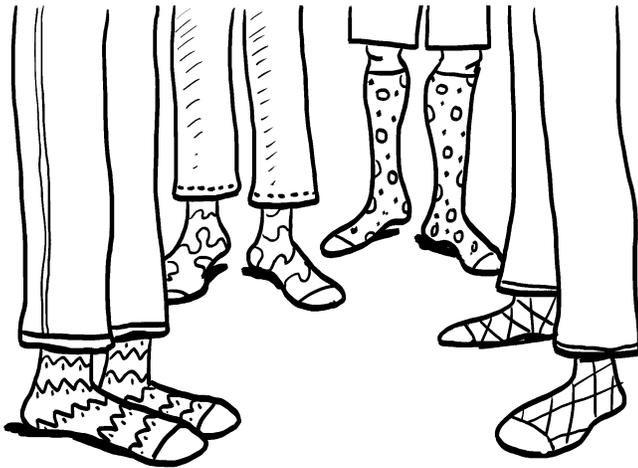
Creative thinkers are in the idea business. They can look at a task, challenge, or situation in multiple ways—so their thinking takes them where others might not go. Being

creative allows your child to come up with clever approaches to presentations and papers. At work, it could help her think of better ways to handle customer service calls or develop new products her company might sell.

Problem solvers identify what is wrong and figure out how to fix it. They compare solutions, pick the best one to try first, and keep going until they find a strategy that works. This kind of thinking and persistence is important in all schoolwork, from science experiments to research projects. And it can help your middle grader solve workplace issues, whether it's making sure colleagues get along better or streamlining a manufacturing process.

4. You don't say

Encourage your tween to use language creatively with this game. Choose three words that everyone in the family has to avoid for an entire day. Pick ones that would be tough to do without (*do, like, you*). They will have to use other phrases to get the point across. *Examples:* "I want to *try* that" instead of "I want to *do* that" or "I'm *fond of* that movie" rather than "I *like* that movie." Another day, select three more "forbidden" words! *Idea:* Pick a phrase that family members often use, such as "Just sayin'" or "My bad," and make it off limits—see what creative new phrases your youngster can come up with that are more meaningful or accurate.

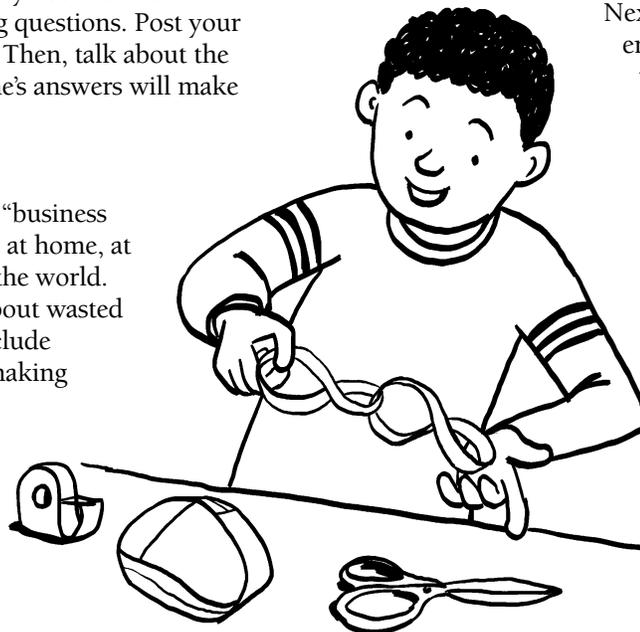


5. Pose creative questions

How would the world change if no one needed water? How might your child celebrate a holiday about socks? Together, brainstorm a list of interesting questions. Post your list, and add to it as you think of more. Then, talk about the questions over dinner. Hearing everyone's answers will make for interesting and fun conversations.

6. I've got this!

Ask your middle schooler to write a "business plan" for solving a real problem he sees at home, at school, in your community, or around the world. For instance, maybe he is concerned about wasted food in the cafeteria. His plan could include launching an awareness campaign by making flyers about food waste and hunger, and designating a donation bin where students can place uneaten fresh fruit and unopened packaged foods. Finally, encourage him to take steps to put his plan into action.



7. Engineer away

Suggest that your tween challenge her friends or family members to build something with household materials. Each person could decide what to create (a zip line for stuffed animals or a musical instrument). Then, gather materials like cardboard boxes, string, old toys, broken appliances, and tools. Display your creations, and take turns showing—and explaining—how they work. *Variation:* Have everyone collaborate on one big project.

8. Make a Möbius strip

A *Möbius strip* is a twisted loop of paper that will stretch your middle grader's thinking as he tries to analyze how it works. To make one, have him cut a 2" x 11" strip of paper and draw a line down the center. Next, he should hold opposite ends, twist the paper once in the center, and tape the ends together. Let him predict what will happen if he cuts along the line. (He will create a longer, thinner Möbius strip.) Why does he think it's still in one piece? What will happen if he:

- cuts it down the center again?
- draws and cuts along a line closer to the edge of the strip?
- makes a new strip with two or three twists?

Middle Years

Character Traits for Success

Lily doesn't give up, even when a school subject or sport is difficult. James is determined to reach his goals—and has a plan for doing so. These students possess positive character traits like grit and drive. Here are ways to develop these and other important qualities in your middle grader.



GRIT: *mental toughness and courage*

Be the tortoise

Remind your middle grader of the story “The Tortoise and the Hare.” The hare is a faster animal, but the tortoise had grit: He kept going even when the race was tough—and he won. Encourage your tween to collect “tortoise moments” from her own life. She can write about them in a journal or take photos of her successes. For instance, she might snap a picture of an awesome test grade in her toughest subject. Or she could describe her sense of accomplishment when she learned a difficult new dive.



Take good risks

Middle schoolers like to take risks. Encourage your child to channel this adventurous spirit in positive ways. He might submit a painting to an art exhibit or enter a STEM competition, for example. Whether or not his artwork is accepted or he wins the contest, he can feel proud that he had the courage to try!

DRIVE: *energy and determination to succeed*

My motto

Encourage your child to come up with personal mottos that remind him to stay determined. Suggest that he keep them simple and fun so they're easy to remember—for instance, “I'm going to rock this!” He could write each motto in big, colorful letters on poster board and decorate it with drawings and designs. Then if he's struggling with a class project or having trouble learning his lines for the school play, he can glance at his poster for motivation to keep going.

Imagine the future

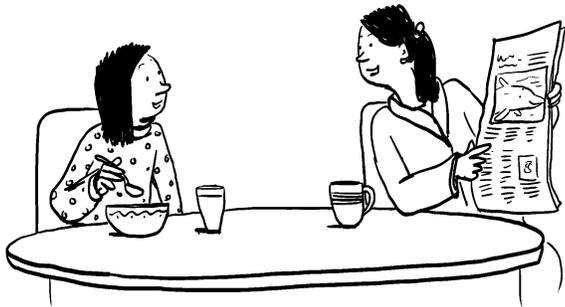
Where would your youngster like to be in 10 years? Have her write a letter to her future self outlining goals she's determined to achieve. Thinking about the future can inspire her to stay driven. *Example:* “Dear Future Self, I am 12 years old. I love using apps, and I dream about developing new ones myself. I hope you have created and sold at least five cool apps by now.”



OPTIMISM: *a feeling or belief that good things will take place*

Seek out good news

Show your middle grader newspaper or magazine articles about good things like a dolphin rescue or a school that raised money for cancer research. If troubling issues do come up, point out a silver lining if possible. (“Look how the whole community came together after the storm.”) *Idea:* Start a nightly ritual of sharing positive news from each of your days.



Start on a positive note

When your tween starts a new class or joins the debate team, encourage him to list all of the positive things that could happen. In his class, he might discover a new favorite author, learn about a job he may consider in the future, or make a friend. On the debate team, maybe he’ll find a cause he’s passionate about, or perhaps the public speaking practice will help him give better presentations in school.

CURIOSITY: *the desire to learn or know more about something*

“I wonder...”

Wondering out loud on a regular basis can spark curiosity in your tween. While driving, you might say something like “I wonder what would change if everyone drove electric cars.” That might lead him to wonder about what would happen to gas stations or whether we would still need sound barriers on highways. Encourage him to share his “wonderings,” and follow up on his questions, too.

Build on interests

Know what your middle grader is into—and use those interests to boost her curiosity in other areas. For instance, if she loves architecture but says history is



boring, encourage her to notice buildings in her history book and on websites. She can investigate why they were designed as they were, leading her to learn more about society during that time period.

INTEGRITY: *honesty and fairness*

Encourage honesty

Tell your tween about situations where you show integrity. Maybe you served on a jury and, as instructed, didn’t discuss the case with your family, even though it was an interesting one. Or explain to her how you keep track of business receipts carefully so you make sure you pay taxes fairly.

Plan ahead

Help your middle grader practice ways to show integrity in the face of peer pressure. Together, come up with things he could say if a friend asks him for test answers or encourages him to sneak out to a party. (“It’s not right, and besides, we’ll both fail if we’re caught” or “No way, my parents trust me, and I’m not messing that up.”)

FLEXIBILITY: *the ability and willingness to adapt to new or changing circumstances*

Roll with the punches

Do pop quizzes or rained-out softball games throw your child for a loop? Share situations where you’ve been flexible, such as when you had to cover for a colleague who called in sick or when you ran out of an ingredient while making dinner. Then, when your tween is faced with an unexpected challenge, help him brainstorm alternatives. Say the neighbor he babysits for moves away. He could look for a new family to sit for or think of different ways to earn money, such as mowing lawns or walking dogs.



Change your strategy

Flexible people are willing to try different approaches. When your youngster has to do a science fair project or a creative writing assignment, suggest that she list various ideas for topics. She’ll see that there’s more than one way to do something—and she’ll have ideas to fall back on if her first one doesn’t pan out.

Middle Years