

Smoothing your child's transition to middle school

Planning and conversation will ease your tween's anxiety about meeting the new, complex demands of middle school.

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Ah, middle school. Though your child may barely be entering puberty and may still be a pre-teen, the transition to middle school is a big step on the road to maturity. A big, scary step. Regardless of what specific grade marks the beginning of junior high or middle school in your community, your child will be both excited and afraid. Researchers have found that students anticipating the move to middle school worry about three aspects of the change: logistical, social, and academic. Your child with learning or attention difficulties shares the same worries as her peers, and may be afraid the change will be even harder for her.

While you won't be able to calm your child's fears completely, with some advance planning and open discussions you can substantially ease her mind. The first step is understanding what may worry your child.

Logistical concerns

When researchers asked kids what aspect of moving to middle school most concerned them, the top answers related to how things at the new school worked (Akos, 2002). How would they find the right classroom? What happened if they were tardy? Where was the cafeteria? What about the bathrooms?

Middle school is a much more complex environment than grade school. The campus is larger, there are more students, and instead of one teacher and one classroom, your child will have a separate instructor, and classroom, for each subject or block of subjects (e.g., language arts/social studies or math/science). It's no wonder kids worry about finding their way in this new world.

For your student with learning or attention problems, understanding the rules and procedures of the new school may be even more important. The challenge of navigating multiple transitions between classes and organizing books and materials for every subject may be all she can handle in the first few weeks. Here are some strategies for helping your child make a smoother transition to middle school:

- Explore the school's Web site with your child. Search for announcements, schedules, and events.
- Accompany your child on campus tours and orientations offered to parents and incoming students. The better you understand the school layout and rules, the more you can help your child.

- Get a map of the campus and take your child to explore. Pick a time after school in the spring or in the days just before school starts in the fall. Be sure to check in with the school office to get an OK for your explorations.
- Include a couple of your child's friends on campus treks. They can boost each other's memory about where things are when school starts.
- Take advantage of summer programs — academic or recreational — offered at the new school for incoming students. Your child will get the feel for the campus in a much more relaxed atmosphere.
- Get a copy of your child's class schedule and mark the location of her locker and each classroom and bathroom on the school map. Tape both of these inside her binder. If your child has trouble reading maps, walk the route between classes with her — more than once, if necessary — and note landmarks that the student can use to navigate.
- Find out the length of the passing period between classes. Time it out for your child. Demonstrate how far she can walk in that amount of time.
- Get a copy of the student handbook. Review rules and requirements — especially the school's code of conduct, which describes consequences for violations of the most important rules. Ask the school staff questions about anything that's unclear.
- Buy your child a lock for her locker several weeks before school starts to give her plenty of time to practice opening and closing it. (Note: Consider whether a combination or keyed lock is best for your child.)
- Make sure your child has an easy-to-read wristwatch so she can quickly see if she needs to hurry to be on time to class. If she has a cell phone, make sure the time is set correctly and she is in the habit of checking it.

Social fears

Another area of worry for students moving to middle school is the social scene. Will I see anyone I know? [Will it be hard to make friends?](#) Will I have to eat lunch alone? [Are the older kids bullies?](#)

Your child is moving from the top of the elementary school heap to the bottom rung of the middle school social ladder. She may have heard that the older students tease or bully the younger ones. She knows for sure that she and her best friends are unlikely to be in every single class together, and, even worse, there may be classes where she doesn't know anyone at all on the first day. And if your child with learning or attention problems struggles to make friends anyway, then this all adds up to a potential social nightmare.

Remember that, in addition to changing schools, your child is entering adolescence, a stage when kids start to rely much more on peers and pull away from parents. This is a time when being part of a group is very important and being perceived as different can be devastating. It's not surprising that finding friends in the new school is a top priority.

The good news is that the more varied social environment also offers many opportunities to meet people. Being in multiple classes each day means your student is surrounded by more potential friends. The better news is that, once students are settled into middle school, they report that friendships and the social scene are among the best things about school (Akos, 2002; Forgan, 2000).

Some things that you can do to ease the social transition:

- Encourage your child to join sports teams, clubs, or other extracurricular activities.
- Ease any loneliness in the early weeks of school by [helping your child arrange weekend social activities](#) with neighborhood, church, or grade school friends.
- Encourage your child to join group conversations. Discuss how to join in without interrupting, to add something relevant to conversation in progress, etc.
- Talk about traits that make a good friend (such as being a good listener).
- Talk about social skills. Discuss how words and actions can affect other people.
- Practice skills needed for difficult social situations.
- Remind your child to make eye contact when speaking or listening.

Academic concerns

Though most students worry more about the logistical and social aspects of middle school before they get there, once settled in, academic concerns rise to the surface. Will the classes be too difficult? Will there be too much homework? Are the teachers hard graders?

It's quite typical for students' academic performance to drop upon entering middle school. Along with everything else that's going on - rollercoaster emotions, physical changes, and social upheaval - your child is also coping with harder classes, more homework, and a whole new set of academic expectations. Middle school teachers don't form the close bonds with students that your child enjoyed in grade school. There is less small group and personalized instruction. Teachers expect students to take charge of assignments and projects with less day-to-day guidance.

For a student with learning or attention difficulties, these changes can come as quite a shock. Teachers may vary in their willingness to understand and accommodate your child's learning needs. Organization and time management demands rise to a new level. Though it can seem overwhelming, keep reminding your child that she can manage these changes successfully, though it will take time and practice.

Some tips to help ease her academic concerns:

- If your child has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), meet with the middle school IEP team no later than the spring before your child enters the new school. Discuss the qualities of the "ideal" teacher for your child to help ensure the best placements.
- Meet with teachers early in the school year. Give them a profile of your child's strengths and where she needs help.
- Encourage teachers to continue using strategies that have worked for your child in the past, such as writing homework assignments on the board, or assigning your child a "homework buddy" she can contact if she forgets what her assignments are. If the school has a homework hotline, make sure your child knows how to use it.
- Help your student with time management skills. Work together on a schedule for study time, break time, chores, etc.

- Work out an organizational system with your student. Acknowledge and make allowances for her anxiety; at first, she may need to carry everything for all classes all the time in order to feel prepared.
- Avoid overreacting to grades. Making sure your child gets a handle on how to meet the demands of the new school is the critical factor in the early weeks.
- Stay connected to your child's school work. Try to teach your student to work more independently while supporting her enough to give her confidence.
- Go to back-to-school night, open houses, parent-teacher conferences and other events where you can connect with your child's teachers.
- Help your child be her own advocate. Encourage her to discuss problems and solutions with teachers on her own, but be ready to step in and help as needed.

The best way to help your child through this transition is to keep a positive attitude about middle school. You may remember how clueless, awkward, and self-conscious you felt at that age. Empathize with her if she feels the same way, and tell her it's normal for middle school students to experience those fears and emotions. Reassure her that she will become more comfortable and confident with time. Remind your child that the school and the teachers want her to be successful and that she has what it takes to make it all work.

Most students make the adjustment to the routines and demands of middle school within a couple months. If your child is still struggling as fall gives way to winter, then a meeting with her counselor may be in order. Together, you, your student and the counselor can pinpoint specific trouble spots and brainstorm ways to get things on track.

Try to give your tween plenty of information about how things will work in middle school, but be careful not to overload her. Be proactive in sharing information with her while also encouraging her to ask questions. To prepare for these conversations, you may want to read through the "[Middle School Transition Tips for Parents](#)" — and offer your child the "[Middle School Transition Tips for Kids](#)." The more she knows up front, the more comfortable she'll be on the first day, and beyond.

References

- Akos, Patrick. "Student perceptions of the transition from elementary to middle school." *Professional School Counseling*, June 2002; 5(5):339-45
- Forgan, James W. "Adolescents with and without LD make the transition to middle school." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 2000; 33(1):33-43