

“Transitions”

How You Can Help Your Child Adapt to Middle School

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Change is a fact of life. Just as summer gives way to fall, our lives contain numerous opportunities for change. How children learn to handle change can impact their health and success in life. For many young people, the transition to middle school can be a challenging time. Moving to a new school with an unfamiliar environment, different teachers, and new friends, can be both exciting and a bit scary at the same time. Middle school students may worry about changing classrooms, finding their way around crowded halls, and finding lockers, bathrooms, and classes in time. Classes might be harder, homework may increase, and students must become organized in order to manage their time and varied assignments.

In addition to these external changes, pre-teens are adjusting to the physical and emotional changes of puberty. They may feel more self-conscious or sensitive, and may experience intense emotions and mood swings. Social changes are also inevitable. As peer pressure increases, middle-schoolers become acutely aware of what their friends think and where they stand on the social ladder. Cliques, bullies and the pressure to conform can leave a child feeling confused, angry, or experiencing self-doubt. As they approach their teen years and assert their independence, parents may think that middle-schoolers need them less. The opposite is true – our children need us to stay involved in their lives and support them through this exciting period of growth and exploration. So, how can parents help?

- **Help your child manage stress** by eating well, staying physically active, and getting enough sleep. Share relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, visualization, or yoga.
- **Be available.** Encourage your child to talk about what's going on in school by practicing active listening ([click here to read more about active listening](#)). Give advice only when asked. Don't interrogate. The idea is to keep your child talking so he knows that he can count on you. Talking with a parent or another trusted adult, can help young people develop self-awareness and a better understanding of their own feelings. If your middle-schooler is unresponsive, start off by chatting about your own day before asking about his. Let your child know that he can come and talk with you later.

- **Tune in.** Look for situations in which you can listen to your middle-schooler's conversation without eavesdropping. You can learn a lot while carpooling middle school kids around. Car rides with your child provide a good opportunity for conversation. Sitting side by side, your child may be more willing to talk. You both need to be in the car anyway, and it can be easier to talk when you don't need to make eye contact.
- **Stay involved in school.** Show your child that you think school is important by attending school programs, athletic events, plays, teacher conferences, and back-to-school nights.
- **Maintain family traditions and family meals.** Your *tween* may sit silently, but these little events will add to her sense of security and remind her of how much she is loved. Middle-schoolers take a lot of hard knocks and need to know their parents are on their side when they get home. That alone can help keep your child on course.
- **Choose your battles.** Your child may wish to experiment with different hairstyles or different types of clothes. Your middle-schooler may be reluctant to help out around the house or to clean up his room. He may also ask for more freedom and independence than he had in elementary school. It's important to decide what is important to you – to set reasonable limits, but give your developing teen some room for self-expression and to develop autonomy.

Learning to navigate change can help a child develop the adaptation skills and self-confidence needed to meet life's other challenges successfully. For an interactive website that kids can visit on the transition to middle school, take a look at <http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/school/middleschool/>