

Making the Transition

Help your child navigate these typical middle school challenges.



By Margery D. Rosen

For many kids, the transition to middle school couldn't come at a worse time. Just as your child is wrestling with her own rollercoaster emotions, just as she's struggling to understand and accept the physical changes in her body — all of which make her alternately distracted, forgetful, anxious, self-conscious and argumentative — everything about the school day is changing, too. Sometimes, this means a whole new school and separation from friends she's known for years. It also means getting used to new teachers for each subject. **Classes are harder, homework increases, and your child must be able to handle many, varied assignments as well as long-range research projects.** The hurdles will be higher if she has trouble staying organized, managing her time well, or retaining what she's learned.

In addition, peer pressure is at its zenith. **Middle-schoolers are acutely aware of what their friends think, and that affects their self-perception and values.** If the in-crowd thinks it's not cool to do well in school, your straight-A student may study sporadically or lose interest in school altogether. Though he still wants good grades, he wants to be popular much more. Boys who mature ahead of their peers are often at a social and athletic advantage. However, girls who mature faster than their friends may feel like social outcasts. Since kids spend most of their time in school, what happens there, and how they feel about it, has a direct effect on learning.

While most children look forward to these years and don't spiral into emotional turmoil, that doesn't mean it's always smooth sailing. Change (large or small) is easier for some kids than others. And while many parents assume that their middle-schoolers need them less, the opposite is true. By staying involved in your child's life, you can anticipate difficulties and be better equipped to help him roll with the punches. Here, **three common challenges middle-schoolers face, plus ways you can help your child meet them:**

1. **She has a different teacher for each subject.** Instead of the supportive setting of elementary school where she had just one teacher who challenged her strengths and understood her weaknesses, she now has several teachers, each with his or her own teaching style and expectations. Adjusting to several new instructors with increased demands can be daunting for even the most resilient child.

What you can do now

- **Most schools offer tours for prospective students in the late spring.** Take advantage of that time to visit with your child so he can meet some of the teachers, hear how the day is structured, and learn the layout of the school so that he at least knows how to find his locker, homeroom, and the cafeteria.
 - **Meet your child's advisor.** Many middle schools assign an advisor, or counselor, to every student (or one for the entire grade). That person, who should be steeped in the developmental needs of early adolescence, acts as mentor, trouble-shooter, and advocate. "A personal relationship with an adult who takes an interest in her learning is one of the most important factors in a middle schooler's success," says Hayes Mizell, Distinguished Senior Fellow at the National Staff Development Council, which provides ongoing training to educators. As the year progresses, get to know all of your child's teachers, not just her advisor, and don't hesitate to contact them if your gut tells you a problem is percolating.
2. **Friendships shift.** At the same time that your child is going through puberty and wrestling with changes in his body and swirling moods, **he's trying to figure out who's in, who's out, and where he stands on the social ladder.** If he's attending a new school, he may be sharing a lunch table with youngsters from one or more elementary schools — kids he may not know and who don't know him. And while alliances may be formed, middle school friendships can shift daily (sometimes several times a day). Cliques, bullies and the pressure to conform can leave a child feeling confused, angry, or flooded with self-doubt. The fallout from all this social turmoil can be a roadblock to learning.

What you can do now

- **Help your child manage his stress** by making sure he eats right, exercises regularly, and gets enough sleep. Show him how deep breathing, visualization, or yoga can help him relax.
- **Remain approachable.** Encourage your child to open up about what's going on in school — but don't interrogate, and give advice only when asked. Your goal is to keep her talking so she realizes she can count on you. Communicating with you, or another trusted adult, can help her develop self-awareness and a better understanding of her own feelings. On days when she's sullen and unresponsive, start off by chatting about your own day before asking about hers. If she still doesn't want to talk, add: "Well, I'll start dinner - if you feel like talking, join me in the kitchen."

- **Tune in.** Look for situations in which you can listen to your middle-schooler's conversation without making it seem like you're eavesdropping. You can learn a lot while carpooling him and a bunch of friends to soccer practice. Car rides can be another great way for starting the flow of conversation. Sitting side by side, not having to make eye contact, your child may feel less pressure to talk – and may do more of it.
 - **Bolster social skills.** If your child says she has no friends, help her find new ways to get to know classmates better. Replace: “No one likes me” with “I’ll be a better listener” or “I’ll invite someone to the basketball game this weekend.” Consider whether she may be unwittingly pushing friends away. Does she interrupt and hog the conversation? Does she always have to be right, first, best? Some children miss social cues and could benefit from professional counseling to become more aware of the way their words and behavior affect others.
3. **He's down on himself.** Perhaps he's distracted, irritable, and doesn't even try – and his grades show it. Simple questions may elicit angry retorts: School is “boring”...he “hates” his math teacher... the science test was “unfair.” Blanket condemnations often mask other problems. Perhaps he's confused by the subject matter or, on the other hand, not challenged enough. Or perhaps he's stuck in a rut of low-self esteem.

What you can do now

- **Don't overreact.** Remind yourself that your child's behavior is not unusual. “For kids this age, everything – social life, extracurricular activities, schoolwork – seems to heat up at once and they need guidance to stay on top of it all,” says Susan Linn, a psychologist at Judge Baker Children's Center and Harvard Medical School in Boston. Give your child emotional support, not a lecture. Empathize with her frustrations (remind her of some of your own school difficulties). Of course, chronic lateness or forgetfulness or consistently low grades may also be a sign of a deeper learning or motivational issue. If your child continues to struggle, schedule a conference with the teacher so you can figure out what steps to take.
- **Help silence his inner critic – the little voice that tells him he's a loser.** The child who doesn't feel good about himself will have a hard time doing well academically. To oust negative thoughts that keep him stuck, role-play how to substitute positive messages. If he says, “I can't do anything right,” suggest that he say to himself: “Mistakes are a chance to learn. I'll ask the teacher for help and do my best.”
- **Stay involved in school.** Kids can easily become overwhelmed in a world that often seems topsy-turvy. They need you more than they realize, and certainly more than they'll say. Ironically, “this is the time when many parents – even well-intentioned ones – take a step back and out of their kid's academic life,” says Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Temple University and author of *The 10 Basic Principles of Good Parenting* (Simon & Schuster). But when Steinberg talks about parental involvement, he doesn't mean correcting homework or simply encouraging a child to do better. “Our research shows that the type of involvement that makes a real difference is the kind that physically draws parents into the school building – by attending school programs, athletic events, plays, teacher conferences, and back-to-school nights. That's what sends a message that you think school is important.”
- **Maintain family traditions and rituals – especially family dinners.** 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.

Margery D. Rosen is a freelance writer and mother of two children; she makes her home in New York City.