

MOVING RIGHT ALONG



*Ways Parents Can Help Children
Succeed in the Middle Grades*



For years, both you and your child knew what to expect when the school year started. It was easy to get pretty comfortable with the basic routine. You knew the day the teacher gave a spelling test. You understood the rules. And if you had a problem, you knew how to get help.

And now come the middle grades! It's an exciting time that marks the beginning of an important new phase in your child's education and personal development. The curriculum is more varied and goes into more detail. Students have more activities available to them. It's a time to start thinking seriously about careers, life choices and plans for higher education.

It can also be a bewildering time. In the middle grades, your child will most likely change rooms and teachers throughout the day. Your child will worry about finding the way from room to room or remembering the locker combination. What if your child doesn't know anyone in class? Will your child be able to do the homework?

You have your own concerns. How will you know what's going on in school? Will you know your child's friends? How will you stay in touch with all those teachers? How will you even know who the teachers *are*? And how will your child be able to keep track of homework?

This booklet can help. It's full of practical, parent-tested advice for helping your child succeed in the middle grades.



Big Changes Are Coming— or Are Already Here

You’ve probably noticed changes both big and small in your child over the last year or so. At times, you may wonder what stranger is living under your roof.

Younger children tell their families about their lives—and they actually *like* talking to them. Suddenly, they are aloof. They have minds of their own. And parents are probably no longer their best friends.

All these changes are perfectly normal. They’re a natural part of growing up. Here are some other changes you may have noticed. Your child may be:

- **Disorganized.** Okay, your child’s room was never neat. But now you have trouble finding the bed. And the permission slip for the field trip? Forget about it.
- **Forgetful.** Your formerly reliable child suddenly forgets to do homework, forgets to give you an important message or forgets to bring textbooks home.
- **Emotional.** Sudden outbursts of tears, anger or unrestrained giggles are pretty much the norm.
- **Exploring.** Last week, your child wanted to be a professional skateboarder. This week, your child is thinking of becoming an astronaut. Last week, your child wanted a piercing. This week, your child is thinking about joining the military. The best advice is: Expect constant changes. (So if your child wants to be a rock star, rent a musical instrument for a while before buying one.)
- **Anxious for independence.** An important job for a parent is to help children become independent. These are the years when your child will start pulling away from you. Friends will be more important than ever.

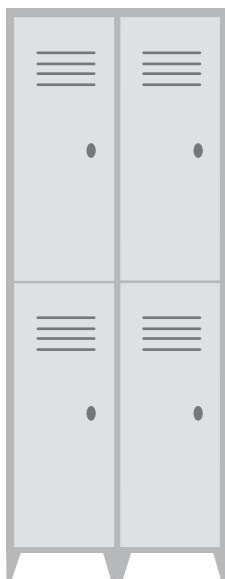
Moving to the Middle Grades—Your Child's Worries and What to Do About Them

In the last year of elementary school, your child is at the top of the heap. Everyone in the school looks up to the big kids. But the next year ...

Your child may not be saying much about the move to the middle grades. But, like most kids, your child is probably worried. Here are some of the things that worry kids at this age and some ways you can help:

- **“I’ll get lost.”** What if your child can’t find math class? Where is the cafeteria? See if you can get a map of the school. There may be one in the student handbook. Walk through the daily schedule together so your child feels more comfortable with the layout of the school. Tape a copy of the map inside your child’s assignment notebook.
- **“I won’t remember what class is next.”** Make several copies of your child’s schedule. Suggest keeping one at home, another inside your child’s assignment notebook and another inside your child’s locker.
- **“I won’t be with my friends.”** In a bigger school, your child may not be in classes with friends from last year. Even if there are familiar faces, your child may find that old friendships are changing. Help boost confidence by pointing out that your child made friends before—and can do so again.

- **“I won’t be able to open my locker.”** You might buy a combination lock and let your child practice. And tell your child *never* to share the combination with anyone. No, not even best friends.
- **“The other kids will be mean to me.”** The middle grades are a time when students form cliques. They may say and do mean things to those who aren’t in the group. Bullying can be a real issue. Listen and watch carefully for signs your child is being bullied. If that occurs, take action. Start by telling the school.
- **“I won’t know the rules.”** Ask for a copy of the school rules. Read them with your child. Talk about them. Be sure your child understands these rules. Many schools have “zero tolerance” policies. That means that breaking certain rules even *once* can get your child into big trouble.



Remind your child that other children starting middle school have these concerns, too.

How Can I Stay Involved?

Family engagement in the middle grades is just as important as it was in elementary school. Studies show that kids whose families stay involved during these years do better in school.

But in the middle grades, most kids give parents a consistent message: Stay away from school. How can you play a role when some days your child doesn't even want to be in the same time zone as you? Here are some tips:

- **Go to school when you're invited.** Before your child moves to a new school, there will probably be a chance for families to visit. Be sure to go. Early in the year, your school will probably invite you to meet your child's teachers. Make sure you attend this, too. Learning the names of all the teachers, and having them see that you want to stay involved, will pay off later if you have questions or problems. If your child plays in the band, go to the concert. If your child is on a team, go to the games.
- **Join the parent-teacher organization.** Your child probably won't want you to help out in class. But you can still play a role. You might work in the library. You could help sponsor a club or team. You could raise money for the band. There are lots of ways to stay a part of your child's education.

- **Learn who can help.** Your child probably has several teachers plus a school counselor. When you have a problem, you may not know who to call or email. Here's a rule of thumb: If your child has a problem in one class, talk to that teacher. If the problem is in several classes or involves a general adjustment to the school, contact the counselor.
- **Read the newsletter.** Most schools send home a newsletter or email to families. Those who read it know when report cards are coming home, when state tests will be given and when the band concert will be. Check your school's website, too. It's another good way to learn what's going on.
- **Learn how to get in touch** with teachers. Some teachers are easy to reach by phone. Others prefer contact by email. When you meet the teachers, find out which way they prefer.
- **Make sure the school knows** how to get in touch with you. At the start of the year, give the school your phone number, email address and a work number if you have one. If these change during the year, be sure to let the school know.



Make Sure the Homework Gets Home

It's disconcerting to hear your child say, "I have math homework, but I forgot the book." Here are some tips to make sure your child has what's needed when it's time to study:

- **Get an assignment notebook.** Many schools give students a planner. If yours does not, then get an assignment notebook. Make sure your child gets into the habit of writing down every assignment, in every class, every day.
- **Use self-stick notes.** Self-stick notes are great for making sure your child brings home the necessary books. Get a pad of sticky notes to keep in your child's locker or schoolbag. After each class, your child should attach a note to a book if it's needed to do assignments for the next day. At the end of the day, it only takes a quick glance to see which books have to go home and which can stay at school.



After School

New research shows that the after-school hours are very important for students' success. Those who take part in supervised after-school activities are more likely to do well than those who spend many hours at home alone. In fact, research says that students who take part in clubs, teams or other after-school activities are more likely to graduate from high school.

Here's how you can make sure your child puts after-school time to productive use:

- **Find out what the school offers.** Some schools sponsor many after-school clubs, sports and activities. Others do not. Learn what's available. Taking part in school activities will help your child make friends with similar interests.
- **Use community resources.** A local community or recreation center may offer some programs after school.
- **Encourage your child to volunteer.** Children at this age are interested in making the world a better place. Help your child look for a volunteer activity.
- **If your child must come home to an empty house,** set up a routine that includes homework and chores—and a limit on recreational screen time.

Get Your Child Organized for Homework

Students in the middle grades have a lot to think about. Most of them can tell you all the lyrics to all their favorite songs. They know the usernames of their friends (and their friends' friends). But can they remember what they're supposed to do for math class tomorrow? Not always.

Teaching middle graders to get organized is a major challenge facing parents *and* schools. Here are some ways you can help:

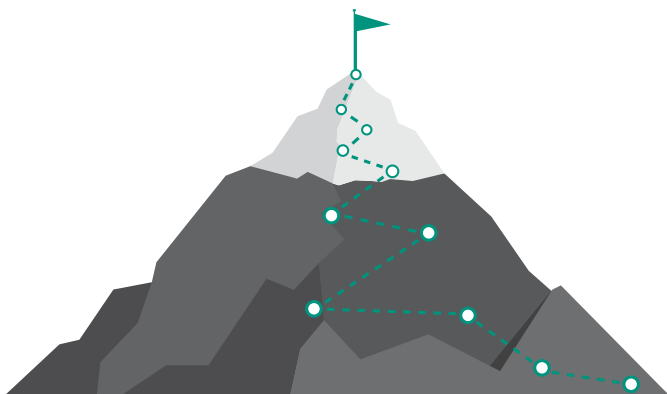
- **Have a regular place for homework.**

Kids at this age are easily distracted. You can remove at least one distraction by making sure all homework supplies are in one place. Studying in the same place every day will also help your child understand that it's time to get to work.

- **Find the best place to study.** Some kids have to sit at a desk. Others like to lie on the floor. No matter where it is, the homework spot should be:

- **Well lit.** Your child needs to see books and papers easily.
- **Quiet.** Turn off the TV and the phone, and keep younger siblings away.
- **Neat.** (Yes, this term is relative.) But your child should be able to *find* the desk and the calculator. Once a week, have your child throw away or file things.
- **Well supplied.** In the middle grades, students need pens, paper, pencils, a calculator and a dictionary. If your child is studying a foreign language, provide a dictionary for that subject as well.
- **Supervised.** If your child works on the computer, make sure it's in a common area.

- **Set goals.** At the start of every study session, have your child look through the assignment notebook or student planner and make a to-do list. Your child can decide what order to do the assignments in. Would your child prefer to finish easier assignments first so the to-do list quickly gets shorter? Or is it more effective for your child to tackle harder assignments earlier in the evening? If there are long-term assignments, have your child break them into steps and check off everything as it is completed. At the end of the study session, your child should put everything back in the schoolbag and set it near the door.



Time Management

It's eleven o'clock and your child is still working on a science report. You didn't even *find out* about the report until an hour ago.

Time management can be a problem for kids in the middle grades. Their assignments get longer, but their attention spans don't always keep pace. Learning how to manage their time is one of the most important skills they can master. Here's how to help your child organize time:

- **Do homework every day—no exceptions.**

Kids who do the best in school study every day. What if your child says, "There's no homework"? First, double-check to make sure it's true. Many teachers post homework online.

You can also make a rule that there's *always* homework to do. If nothing is due for tomorrow, your child can review history, start to outline a science report or work on solving missed math problems from the last quiz.

- **Find your child's "prime time."** Some kids want to study right after school. Others need a little downtime before they can pay attention. Some kids even do their best work early in the morning. Figure out when your child is most alert. Then make that study time.

- **Take breaks.** Research says that students remember more from two shorter study sessions than from one longer session. Encourage your child to take short, but regular, breaks.



- **Plan ahead.** A big calendar with lots of room for writing is essential. At the start of each week, have your child write down all obligations. Then have your child write down any big assignments or tests and figure out when to get the work done. What happens if soccer practice is at the time as study time? Your child will have to plan accordingly.

Remember—school is your child’s most important job. When after-school activities start hurting grades, it's time to think about giving something up.

Staying Healthy

Ask kids at this age how they're doing and you're likely to hear two things: They're tired and they're hungry.

Most kids don't get enough sleep. They may work on schoolwork until late at night. And the school bus may pick them up early in the morning. By the end of the week, they're exhausted.

You can help your child by following these steps:

- **Make a plan.** When does your child have to get up in the morning? Make sure bedtime is early enough to give your child the 9 to 11 hours of sleep experts recommend for children up to age 13 (it's 8 to 10 hours for kids 13 and older).
- **Make sure** your child goes to bed at the same time each night and avoids screen time at least one hour before bed. This makes it easier to fall asleep.
- **Let your child sleep a little later** on weekends if necessary. But limit the time to one or two extra hours.

Your child may also be hungry. Children at this age are growing and changing so fast that their bodies need plenty of nourishment. Make sure your child starts each day with a healthy breakfast. Bagels, smoothies and fruit are great for kids on the go. Another option is for your child to eat breakfast at school. Your child may also want to carry a simple snack of fruit, cheese or vegetables to school. Some schools start lunch before 11:00 in the morning. Other kids may not have lunch until 1:00.



The next few years of your child's life will be exciting for both of you. By staying involved and connected, you can help your child come through these middle years in great shape.

Some days, your child will have you tearing your hair out. Other days, your child will say insightful things that surprise you.

Just remember to keep calm, keep your sense of humor and keep in touch with both your child and the school.

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