



Getting Ready for Middle School

Our tips will help you and your child prepare for the changes and challenges of middle school.

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As your child gets ready to enter middle school, both you and she both probably have some concerns. As a parent, you're concerned about her learning enough to be prepared for high school. She's worried about finding her way to English class. You want to be sure she's safe as she travels to and from school by herself for the first time; she's worried about whether she has the right haircut. You both hope she'll fit in, make new friends and not be too overwhelmed by middle school homework.

As a parent, your concerns are likely to be about the big picture, such as whether middle school will prepare your child for a successful future. She's probably more worried about immediate logistical concerns, such as knowing how to open her locker on the first day of school. Recognizing this difference in priorities will help you support her while keeping your eye on her overall progress. Here are some tips to get you both ready for this new adventure:

Help your child get oriented:

Call the school to see if there is an orientation for new students, and encourage your child to attend. If there's no orientation, ask if you and your child can go look around a day or two before school starts. Together you can locate important places like the office, his locker, the cafeteria and restrooms. Lockers often top the list of middle-schoolers' worries. In a [Scholastic.com article](#), Deborah Wilburn suggests buying a combination lock for your child to practice with over the summer. This will keep your child from fumbling with his locker the first day and help him get to class on time!

Practice getting to school and plan for emergencies:

If your child will be getting to school on her own, practice the route a few times before school starts and talk about places she could get help if she needed it. Businesses, bus drivers or homes of people you know are good possible spots for help. Be sure you and your child are both confident in her ability to get to school alone.

Encourage the buddy system:

If your child is worried about facing the first day of school alone, encourage him to call a friend from elementary school who'll be attending his middle school and arrange to meet before school or at lunchtime. Making plans for lunch will calm fears he might have about facing a crowded cafeteria alone.

Practice wardrobe wisdom:

Shopping for school clothes with middle-schoolers can be difficult. Striking a balance between setting limits and giving your child some autonomy can make it easier. First, check with the school to see if there is a dress code. Many middle schools prohibit tank tops, short shorts or clothes of particular colors. Then, let your child consult with her friends to see what everyone else will be wearing. It's also a good idea to not buy everything before school starts; this gives your child a chance to see this year's "must have" fashions before the clothing budget is exhausted. Give her as much freedom in selecting her wardrobe as you can, but reserve the right to have the final say on what is appropriate.

Learn about school rules:

Before the first day, check with the school about policies regarding dress codes, cell phone use and whether there is an open campus at lunch time. This will help your child avoid accidentally breaking the rules. And knowing ahead of time how the school manages behavior problems like bullying might help your child feel more secure right off the bat.

Help your child get organized:

Help her start a "To Do" list in a day planner or small notebook. This will get her organized for the new responsibilities of middle

school. You'll also want to check in with your child about her assignments fairly frequently. She may have more long-term projects or assignments than she did in elementary school or have several tests to study for at the same time. She might need your help at first to figure out how to get it all done in time. This doesn't mean you should do your child's homework. She needs to learn to "own" her work but may need advice about how to approach it.

Teach time management:

Teach your child to make the most of his time by always carrying a book or review sheet with him. Then odd moments like waiting for the bus or sitting in the doctor's office can be used as productive study time. It's also important to help your child establish an evening routine that includes time for homework and any other obligations your child has. This will help avoid the middle school time crunch that comes from having more homework and more time-consuming extracurricular activities.

Stay on top of your child's class schedule:

Your child may want more independence about choosing her classes, but you should check with a guidance counselor to be sure she's meeting all requirements and taking all the classes she'll need for high school.

Keep the lines of communication open:

Even if it seems as if he doesn't want to talk to you, it's important for you to be available for your middle-schooler. Psychologist and parent-child communication expert Dr. Lawrence Kutner recommends these strategies for talking to your middle-schooler on FamilyEducation.com: Talk with your child frequently about small issues. If he won't tell you how baseball practice went, he won't open up to you about more important issues either. He also recommends that parents talk to kids while driving or cooking, instead of sitting down directly across a table for a chat. It can be less threatening for middle-schoolers to talk if they don't have to make direct eye contact. He also encourages parents of middle-schoolers to be persistent: "Parents aren't encouraged [by their kids] to keep communicating and kids might not look like they're listening, but they really are."

Beware the bully:

Many children are afraid of being bullied in middle school, and it's a growing problem in our schools. Fortunately, many schools now have rules in place for preventing and managing bullying; be sure to find out if your school has such a policy. Teach your child what to do if a bully targets her. KidsHealth.org suggests telling kids to try not to show their anger in front of the bully, because that will just make the bully feel powerful. Children should ignore the bully and walk away if they can. They should also tell an adult they trust what is happening. You can emphasize to your child that it is not being a "tattletale" to tell an adult about bullying. Also let your child know that it is not a good idea to fight or bully back. It could get her in trouble, and it is hard to know how the bully will react. If there is a particular time or place when your child often faces a bully, suggest that she try to enlist a friend to be there with her. Bullies are less likely to target a pair.

For more advice on how to help your middle-schooler, see Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence.

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