

# Adjusting to Middle School

Sometime around age 10 or 11, most children enter middle school. They leave behind the security and familiarity of elementary school for a new and different school life. Middle school students attend a variety of classes, face tougher academic challenges, and have many teachers throughout the day. They have to learn how to navigate larger school buildings with more students and a more hectic pace. Experts refer to these years—from ages 10 to 14—as “early adolescence.” This is a time of tremendous physical, cognitive, and emotional change in a child’s life. It is also a time of challenges and adjustment for parents. It’s no wonder that some experts consider this the biggest educational transition a child will make throughout his or her school years.

## Understanding the changes your child is going through

During early adolescence, your child will enter puberty. She will grow more attached to friends and become more independent of you. At the same time, she will still need the structure you can provide, whether she admits it or not. Her thinking, ideas, and worldview will expand. All of these changes are taking place at a time when your child is also adjusting to a new school. This can be a lot for a child to handle.

**Physical changes.** Children this age are changing and growing fast, and they mature at widely varying rates. Some still look like young children; others appear more grown up. Girls generally enter puberty sooner than boys do. Both boys and girls can become self-conscious about their changing bodies and insecure about how they look.

**Emotional changes.** Hormonal and developmental changes can make your child feel tired, restless, and prone to mood swings. Some days your child will act like a baby, curled up on the couch and needing a lot of attention; the next day he may seem 10 going on 16 or 20.

**Social changes.** Your child will make many new friends during middle school. Friends become a priority. New sexual awareness will develop. Peer pressure becomes more intense, and your child may become more interested in friends than in school.

**Intellectual changes.** Children become more critical and analytical during the middle school years and develop their own points of view. Their sense of humour also becomes more adult. Your child may become argumentative and question your values and authority. She will be stimulating—and challenging—to have around.

## Helping your child make the adjustment to middle school

Here are some ways to help support your child in and out of school during this time of tremendous change:

**Make sure your child has been to visit the school before the school year begins.** Most schools provide a tour for incoming students prior to the beginning of the school year. This helps ease anxiety about new teachers and unfamiliar surroundings.

**Touch base often with your child’s teachers or school administrators to make sure his needs are being met.** Many parents become less involved in their children’s education during middle school. Often this is because children start pushing parents away in an effort to become more

independent. But your child needs your support and involvement more than ever. Studies show that parental involvement in school increases student achievement. Try to learn the names of all of your child's teachers so you can talk about school with him. Attend back-to-school night, teacher conferences, and other school events to show your support and interest.

**Help your child develop positive friendships.** Your child will turn to peers for acceptance, support, and approval. You want to help her find positive friends and learn to handle peer pressure and problems. Get to know your child's friends by inviting them over and offering to carpool. Make a list of friends' names and phone numbers, and their parents' names and phone numbers too. Find opportunities to talk with the parents of new friends. If you find you don't like a friend your child is drawn to, try to withhold judgment. Forbidding the friendship is usually not a good idea unless you find out there are serious concerns with this friend, such as drug or alcohol use.

**Support and help your child with homework.** Your child will have to work harder in middle school and will have much more homework. Help him form good study habits. Many children in middle school need help with organization. You can:

- Find out the school's homework policy and the expectations of each teacher. Are students required to use a particular assignment book or track homework assignments online? Some schools have a "homework hotline" or website you can check for daily assignments and tests and to monitor your child's grades.
- Help your child plan ahead for long-term projects. He may need help planning and breaking the project down into smaller parts. He may also need to keep a list of weekly reminders.
- Make sure your child has a quiet place to do homework.
- Help your child find his most productive time of day to work. This can vary from child to child.

**Be sure your child gets enough sleep.** Children ages 10 to 14 are growing fast and working hard, so they need their rest. Your child will want to stay up later. Just be sure she is getting the rest she needs. On average, experts suggest children this age get a minimum of 8 to 10 hours of sleep a night.

**Make the effort to listen supportively and try not to lecture or criticize.** It's normal for children this age to stop opening up as much as when they were younger. "How was school?" produces a one-word response: "Fine." Try to pick up cues from your child about the best time to talk. It might be while the two of you are riding side by side in the car, shooting baskets together, or having dinner. Talking on the phone and texting are also good ways to communicate with kids this age.

**Allow your child to make mistakes.** Rather than try to solve your child's problems, guide and steer him to possible solutions. If he does make a mistake, try not to overreact. Use it as an opportunity to talk about what went wrong and what to do differently next time.

**Help your child find activities she enjoys and in which she can feel successful and confident.** The activity may be school-related—performing in the school play or band. Or it may be a volunteer activity in which your child feels she is making a difference, such as helping at a community-service club or outdoor club, or tutoring other students. Maybe your child could join a youth group at a church, synagogue, or other community centre.

**Trust your instincts as a parent and set clear limits.** "But everybody else is allowed to stay at the party until 11. Why can't I?" You are bound to hear arguments like this during the middle school years. It's important to keep in mind that all parents have different rules and standards of behavior, and you need to stand by the rules that feel comfortable for you and your family.

**Reinforce your safety expectations.** Your child will start to want more independence. However, he also needs your guidance and protection and clear guidelines to follow so he avoids risky, unsafe situations in your community and online. When your child leaves home for an activity, you may want to make a habit of saying, "Let's talk about where you are going and who you will be with. What will you be doing? And let's talk about what time you need to be home." Monitor your child's internet use.

**Encourage your child to stay active.** Research shows that these years are critical in determining how active your child will be in later adolescence. Encourage interest in sports, music, drama, or another extracurricular activity. Encourage your child to try new skills. Also, you can teach your child to be active and fit by being active and fit yourself.

**Try not to take your child's rejection of you personally.** Your child may now be embarrassed by you in front of friends, shut you out of her room, and criticize the way you talk or dress. Her moodiness may cause *you* to feel moody, but it's important to accept and respect your child's emerging independence and need for privacy. Remember, deep down she still loves you and needs to know you are there for her.

**Find opportunities to have fun together as a family.** Experts agree that children who feel connected to school and to their families are less likely to drink, do drugs, or become sexually active. Plan activities in which you can all be together, whether it's sharing meals, going on hikes, renting movies as a family once a week, or doing a volunteer activity together.

**Help your child become more independent.** Your child is old enough to begin making decisions for himself. It's time for you to let go of some of the control at home, which will also help to reduce the power struggles you and your child may be having. For example, instead of declaring what time homework has to begin, try involving your child in the decision. You may have to go over the plan and impose consequences if it isn't working, but it's important to let your child make mistakes and even wrong choices once in a while, as long as the consequences are small. That's how he will learn about responsibility.

**Get to know other parents.** Parents have less contact with each other when children reach middle school. Connecting with other adults will help ease your adjustment to a new school. You can share information about homework and after-school clubs, social events, and curfews. Reach out to other parents at back-to-school night, school concerts, plays, sports events, and PTO activities.

**Steal a hug whenever you can.** Even if your child is trying to push you away, find ways to stay close. Remember, your child wants your approval and attention, even if she pretends otherwise.

**If you sense that something is wrong or that your child is having problems, take action.** Dropping grades or not wanting to go to school are just two signs that your child may be having trouble adjusting to middle school. Teachers and school counselors are there to help you with problems, so don't wait for the first report card or the first parent-teacher conference to act. If you sense there is a problem, make an appointment right away to speak with a teacher or school counsellor.

**Keep in mind that it could take a year or longer for your child to feel comfortably settled in his new school.** He may go through different friends and phases. During this adjustment period, remember how your child handled transitions in the past. Were they hard for him? Easy? Often, this is a good predictor of what to expect.

The help and resources you give your child today will stay with her. A successful adjustment to middle school can lead to a successful school experience for years to come.

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