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On Parenting Perspective

# Five ways parents can help their kids transition smoothly to middle school

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By Phyllis Fagell

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Beth Houf, the principal of Fulton Middle School in Missouri, spent several days this summer visiting her 200 rising sixth-grade students at their homes. She would sing about her [plans on social media](#), throw on school spirit gear, then hit the road with her assistant principal and her counselor. Houf knows that kids find the move to middle school difficult, and she hopes that the visits ease their anxiety.

Once students recover from the shock of seeing their principal at the front door, they spill their fears: How will I know where to go? What if I can't get my locker open? Will I still see my old friends if they're not in any of my classes? What if I have no one to sit with at lunch?

Parents can find the transition equally unsettling, whether they have painful memories of the phase, feel unsure of their role in the new setting or worry their child will struggle to make the developmental leap.

Mere months separate elementary from middle school, but the shift can seem seismic. Suddenly, kids must navigate a more complex world with multiple teachers, new routines and an influx of new peers. "My daughter is in fifth grade, and until she makes the transition, she only has to focus on relationships with one primary teacher and 25 classmates," explains Shawn DeRose, the principal of Glasgow Middle School in Northern Virginia and a consultant with the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). "But in middle school, she'll have to interact with seven different teachers and more than 100 kids a day."

Adding to the upheaval, many sixth-graders are already in the throes of puberty and feeling more self-conscious and less self-assured. Rather than subscribe to the conventional wisdom that this is a phase to dread, however, parents can use the following five strategies to help their child transition smoothly to middle school.

## Create an action plan

Find out your child's biggest concerns and extinguish their anxiety with small exposures. If they're afraid they'll get lost, visit the school at a quiet time, walk the halls and peek into classrooms. Sign them up for any orientation programs or mock school days. If they're overwhelmed, set up a meeting with their school counselor.

Help them prepare for different scenarios. If they get lost, for example, explain that they can stop an adult, establish eye contact, then firmly say, "I'm new and don't know where to go." If they're worried about lunch, you might suggest they meet a friend outside the entrance of the cafeteria.

“At the core of resilience is self-efficacy,” says psychologist Mary Alvord, the author of [“Conquer Negative Thinking for Teens.”](#) She created the Resilience Builder Program, a curriculum that hones students’ sense of agency. “You can’t control your schedule, where the classes are or what teachers you get, but you can control being prepared, listening and finding academic buddies you can call if you miss something.”

### **Normalize feeling out of place**

“In middle school, you start to think about how everyone else views you,” says social psychologist Chris Rozek, a research associate at Stanford University. “Kids’ friendships become more unstable and they’re more sensitive to social rejection.”

If a new sixth-grader has no one to sit with in the lunchroom one day or bombs a test, “they may start to question whether they fit in socially or can succeed academically,” notes Geoffrey Borman, a professor at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Borman and Rozek conducted research to see whether it was possible to bolster kids’ sense of belonging by underscoring that all students have difficulty at the start of middle school but eventually feel better.

The students read and reflected on comments purportedly made by seventh-graders, who said things such as, “I felt like I had a knot in my stomach in my first few months and was afraid to talk to my teachers. I worried that they thought I was dumb, but they believe in you even when you get bad grades and want to help you get better.” The results of their study, published in the journal PNAS, show that students who got the intervention liked school and trusted their teachers more and were more invested in doing well.

Parents may get similar results by sharing times they experienced self-doubt in middle school. You also can give your child books that normalize feeling out of sorts. Lori Steel, a librarian at National Cathedral School, recommends [“How to Survive Middle School”](#) by Donna Gephart and [“Awkward”](#) by Svetlana Chmakova, two stories that “use much-needed humor to reassure struggling students that they’re not alone during this challenging rite of passage.”

### **Preview potential challenges**

You can prepare your child to resist future persuasion “much the same way vaccines prepare our bodies to resist future viruses,” says Joshua Compton, an associate professor of speech at Dartmouth College who researches inoculation theory.

If you preemptively talk to your child about behaviors such as cheating, bullying or peer pressure, they’ll be less likely to be caught off guard, he explains. Discuss what their friends might argue to persuade them to engage in risky, unkind or unethical behavior, then provide a compelling counterargument. To discourage gossiping, for example, Compton recommends saying, “After we hear a rumor, our first thought might be to tell our friends as soon as possible. It feels good when others think we have interesting things to say. But spreading rumors hurts people, and it’s a much better feeling to know that we are someone people can trust.”

## **Give them a runway to share daily experiences**

Sixth-graders are flooded with highs and lows and need time to process them, says Katie Powell, a sixth-grade reading and English teacher at Southmont Junior High in Crawfordsville, Ind., and the author of “[Boredom Busters](#).” “One moment they’re excitedly talking about their favorite cartoon, then crying because the girl they liked now likes someone else, then doing Fortnite dances in the hallway.”

She once abruptly stopped a lesson because she overheard a girl say she sees better with glasses but worried people would think she was ugly if she wore them. “I said, ‘All right, y’all, it’s time for Life Lessons with Mrs. Powell,’ then shared my own experiences being reluctant to wear my glasses when I was a young teen.”

Open a conversation if your child expresses vulnerability, and mine school newsletters and social media feeds for clues about their daily life. Houf, a NASSP Digital Principal of the Year, told me she posts more than 100 pictures a day. “Our staff is relentless,” she says. “We want families to have talking points, to know, ‘Hey, my kid was dissecting frogs today.’”

## **Get involved, but mindfully**

DeRose recommends that parents join the parent association, get to know school staff and “join the conversation,” but he knows parents can get mixed messages. When his oldest daughter went to middle school, he remembers feeling as though he should back off. “I had this sense that she was becoming a teenager, and that I shouldn’t get as involved because she didn’t seem to want that,” he recalls. “But when I put on my principal hat, I know the exact opposite is true. The most successful parents are right there alongside their child — but they’re supporting them, not fighting their battles.”

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