

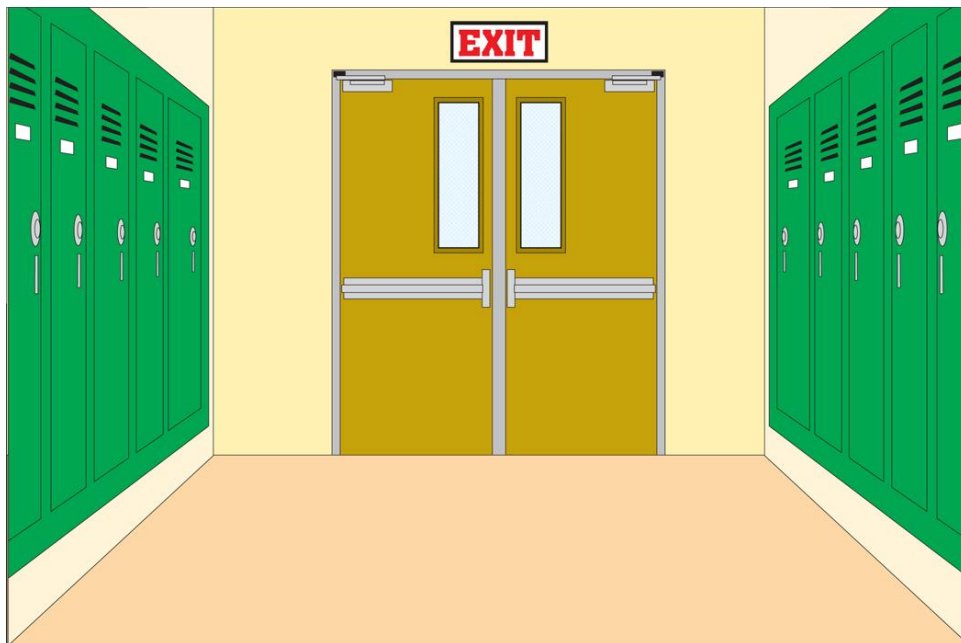
Moving up to Middle School

Adapted from U.S. Department of Education Family Resource Center

Every year, millions of elementary school students across the country take the big leap to middle school. Students look forward to this transition as a stepping-stone toward adulthood, a move to increasing independence, and an opportunity to redefine themselves in new surroundings. At the same time, many are apprehensive about this step into the unknown, to new and more complicated social situations, increased academic pressure and more teachers to deal with, and a seemingly vast array of opportunities to succeed or fail.

These worries are very real. Most elementary school students are leaving a school structure in which they have only one or two teachers each year, where they are the oldest students in the school, and where they may know many teachers and students well. By contrast, middle school may appear huge and complex, full of unknown hazards and new responsibilities. Students preparing to enter middle school voice such concerns as having too much homework, not being able to keep grades up, getting lost in the school, being around older kids who might bully them, being tardy to class, having to make new friends, and not knowing the rules.

Parents can provide a stable and nonjudgmental source of reassurance for their students, and in turn, students can feel safe expressing hopes and fears about the new school to their parents. Through conversations and actions, parents can help their students deal with their fears and identify the positive aspects of the move to middle school.



Development during early adolescence

- **Physical:** During early adolescence, the body undergoes more development than at any other time, except the first two years of life. Developmental growth includes significant increases in height, weight, and internal organ size as well as changes in skeletal and muscular systems, and the onset of puberty. Physical growth is often rapid and uneven, causing many adolescents to lack coordination and literally have growing pains.
- **Intellectual:** During early adolescence, youth are most interested in real-life experiences and authentic learning opportunities; they are often less interested in conventional academic subjects. They are deeply curious about the world around them but may lose interest quickly if information is not presented dynamically with plenty of interaction and peer-to-peer involvement. Young adolescents develop the capacity for abstract thinking, and they are able to think about their future, anticipate needs, and develop personal goals.
- **Moral/ethical:** Young adolescents tend to be idealistic and possess a strong sense of fairness. They are moving from being self-centered to considering the rights and feelings of others. They begin to realize that moral issues are not strictly black and white. They are able to consider ethical and moral questions but lack experience and reasoning skills to make sound moral and ethical choices, which can put them at risk.
- **Emotional and psychological:** Young adolescents begin to seek independence and to develop a strong sense of individuality and uniqueness. At the same time, they are highly sensitive to criticism, want to fit in with their peers, and are likely to have low self-esteem. They may be moody, restless, self-conscious, and unpredictable as they experience intense emotions and stress.
- **Social:** Young adolescents have a strong need to belong to a group. Peer approval becomes more important and they are likely to turn to friends first when experiencing a problem. As they mature socially, they often have opposing loyalties to peer group and family. Though young adolescents may be rebellious toward parents and adults, they still depend on them and desire their approval. They tend to test limits and challenge adult authority figures. (Adapted from Caskey & Anfara, 2007)

Tips for Parents:

Students entering middle school often experience a variety of fears, from how to find their classrooms to worrying about bullies. Here are some strategies for helping your student work through those fears.

Give your student opportunities to express his/her feelings about middle school. If your student isn't bringing up the topic but you notice that he/she is more distracted or stressed out than usual, initiate a conversation. Acknowledge the change that is coming and ask open-ended questions to see if anything is worrying him/her.

Don't minimize his/her fears and concerns. It's tempting to try to downplay them or respond with a blanket statement like "You'll be fine." Sometimes just listening and empathizing is enough. Listen to what he/she has to say and offer practical suggestions if it appears he/she wants your advice.

Help your student overcome fears of the unknown. If he/she is worried about opening a combination lock, bring one for him/her to practice on. If getting between classes sounds impossible, get a stopwatch and create a course so he/she can see how long it takes to get from one place to another. If homework sounds scary, ask his/her teacher or counselor to provide some guidance. Make sure he/she knows where the bus stop is.

Talk about your own transitions, during middle school or any time in your life. Strategic self-disclosure may be a useful tool to help your student see that his/her worries are normal and expected. You may even get a laugh or two as you describe your own experiences and how you handled them.

Help your student get organized. Middle school means more homework and a greater need to stay organized to keep up with assignments from multiple teachers. You can relieve your student's worries about schoolwork by helping him/her develop his/her organizational skills. Look at how his/her work is currently organized and offer tips for improvements, and talk about how he/she can organize his/her free time to get homework done.

Help your student set goals for getting involved in new things. Look at elective class offerings together and check out extracurricular activities. Talk about how an after-school activity can help him/her make new friends, and how elective classes allow him/her to follow his/her own interests with students who share them.

Point out your students' strengths and abilities. Early adolescence is a time of plummeting self-esteem and self-confidence. Find ways to remind your student about his/her abilities and how they will help him/her be successful in his/her new school. Be specific in your praise. For example, "You've really gotten organized with your schoolwork this year. That will help a lot when you start middle school."

Talk about friendships. Changing schools doesn't have to mean losing friends. See if your student can name some students he/she wants to get to know better who are going to the new school. Talk about how he/she has made new friends in the past. Remind him/her that he/she has friends in other settings, too—in the neighborhood, place of worship, or sports activities.

Support your student throughout the first year of middle school. Your student's worries won't disappear when he/she enters the middle school for the first time. Adjusting to the new school and finding his/her place there will take time, and he/she is bound to feel discouraged at times. As he/she comes to you with problems and concerns, listen and use open questions to help her problem-solve on her own. You can't fix his/her problems for him/her, but you can offer your own perspectives.

Seek out help for your student if problems persist. Parents sometimes see academic struggles, changes in behavior, or signs of emotional stress before teachers and other school staff. If you believe your student needs additional help, alert your school counselor. Middle schools usually have more resources than elementary schools to help students through a difficult period.