

Kids' Biggest Middle School Fears

Help ease the transition to a new school by tuning into what worries your child most.

Whether your child starts middle school in 6th grade or 8th (and no matter how confident he is at the prospect), chances are there's something about it that has him scared silly. What concerns kids most, and how can parents help them work through their fears? An informal survey of parents, students, and experts who work with adolescents turned up the following:

Combination locks. Many a preteen is terrified that she won't be able to get her locker open. As a result, she'll be stuck with no place to put her books, or she won't be able to retrieve needed materials for the next class or at the end of the day.

What you can do: First, understand that this fear isn't completely unfounded, as students have limited time between classes. Try buying your preteen a combination lock over the summer to practice on, or see if the school will allow him to come try the lockers out before the start of the school year.

Being late for class. Yes, preteens have loads of energy, but even they find it challenging to move from class to class on time. The consequence for lateness can be detention. No kid wants to get in trouble because he wasn't fast enough!

What you can do: Reassure your child that he's not alone. Brainstorm ways to streamline the process. What will he do if he's not sure where a particular class is located? Who will he ask for directions (for example, the teacher of his previous class, or his advisor)? Is he good at keeping his books and papers organized? If not, help him clean up the mess so he doesn't waste precious minutes between classes. And remind him that he'll have to save socializing for lunchtime or after school.

Not having friends. James (name changed) is a 7th grader in Murfreesboro whose main concern at the start of middle school was making friends. He says he was worried about "the new people I would meet, and not being part of the same group as in elementary school." Middle school can be an especially difficult time for girls, given the rotating nature of girls' friendships, the emergence of queen bees, and the shifting social order.

What you can do: Try to focus on this time of new beginnings. You might ask, "Do you know anyone from your old school who is going to be there?" If she scoffs at your attempts to identify potentially friendly faces in the crowd, try to identify her fears and put them in perspective. You might say, "You had friends at your old school, what do you imagine might happen that you wouldn't you be able to make friends at the new one?" or "Are you worried that the kids from your elementary school won't want to be friends anymore?" Don't feel like you have to supply a steady stream of solutions. Sometimes it helps kids just to voice their fears to a sympathetic listener.

Being too different. Nothing is worse for middle schoolers than standing out in a way they haven't chosen, which means anything at the far end of the "normal" curve. For a girl, it could mean being the tallest in the class or the most developed; for a boy, it could mean being the shortest or the clumsiest. At some schools, fashion is the arbiter of all things

cool, and middle schoolers (especially girls) live in dread of showing up with the wrong backpack, brand of jeans, or style of shoes.

What you can do: First, understand that tweens are a stage that marks the beginning of their search for an identity. Whatever it is about your preteen's personality or appearance that concerns her, don't say, "That's silly," or "It doesn't matter." Minimizing her feelings (even with the best of intentions) will only make her feel more alone. Preteens' self-esteem drops during this time, due to a combination of hormonal activity (remember too that puberty is setting in) and brain development. Emphasize the positive as one way of boosting an insecure preteen's confidence. If, for example, a boy is small in stature but fast on the playing field, his parents could coach him to view his size as an asset rather than a liability.

Tough classes. Some kids worry that they won't be able to keep up academically. A child who is nervous about the increased workload may worry that there will be too much reading, or that he got good grades in elementary school not because he was smart, but because the teachers liked him.

What you can do: There's certainly nothing wrong with acknowledging that the work will be harder (it will be!), but assure your child that it won't be more than she can handle. Remind her that while being a good student is important, she has other strengths as well — perhaps she loves to draw, or plays soccer — so that her entire sense of self isn't wrapped up in grades. Encourage her to let her teacher —and you — know if she thinks she needs extra help, or if she's falling behind. That way you can take steps to address problems early on, perhaps by having her meet with a teacher after school, or working with a tutor.