



# Preparing Your Child, and You, for Middle School

BY LISA FEGEN

As the elementary school chapter of your child's life ends, you now find your child embarking on a new, strange voyage full of mystery, intrigue, and plenty of drama: middle school! While parents oftentimes see middle school as a time to step back and let their children take control, the truth is that in reality, most students lack the skills and maturity to take this step on their own. To help successfully navigate through this sometimes rocky (but always eventful) transition, you will need to guide your child with a steady hand.

**Y**ou should maintain a strong involvement in your child's school, just as you did when he or she was younger; however, it is probably time to re-think your family's current plan for managing homework, school, and extracurricular activities. If you didn't have one before, you definitely need one now!

Doing some research about adolescent brain development is also a great idea so that you have a better understanding of what your student is going through. Accomplishing all of these tasks may seem like a tall order, but following some simple advice and guidelines can make the middle school transition manageable for both parent and student.

Becoming involved in a new school community might seem intimidating, but it really is as easy as attending open house, school orientations, and parent/teacher events. If your child's school has a website, spend some time perusing the site to become familiar with school policies and rules along with upcoming activities that might interest you and your child. If your school district invests in an online grade book, make sure that you know how to log in. This tool can be used as a valuable resource throughout the year (in addition to progress and report cards) to assess your child's learning and success. Most importantly, get to know your child's teachers. Unlike their elementary school counterparts, middle school teachers can have up to 160 students a year. It's easy for kids and parents to get lost in the shuffle, so

make the effort to introduce yourself with a friendly email to your child's teachers wishing them a great school year. The value of a strong home/school connection cannot be emphasized enough. Realize that your child's success is dependent on the combined efforts of you, your child, and your child's teachers. Each of you holds a vital role in ensuring success, so nurture that relationship from Day 1.

Similarly, investing some time reading the latest research on adolescent brain development isn't as difficult as it seems either, and can help parents to better understand the changes your child will soon be going through. I highly recommend *Coming of Age, The Education and Development of Young Adolescents* by Kenneth Brighton. In this book, Brighton explains how the pre-frontal cortex of the brain does not mature until the early to mid twenties. This part of the brain controls organizational skills, mood, impulse control, and the ability to objectively evaluate situations and possible consequences. This can help to explain a lot of the new challenges you and your child will most likely encounter and hopefully provide you with the comfort of knowing that the reasons for lapses in judgment are, for the most part, biological. Of course, that will explain your child's behavior, not yours!

Brighton also sheds light on intellectual, social, and emotional development that adolescents experience. He discusses a typical academic decline known as "the 7th grade slump" due to emerging social development, and how becoming argumentative is a newly developing skill our adolescents are discovering and refining during this time in their lives. Your best defense is to arm yourself with understanding. As parents, you researched every stage of development as your children grew from infancy, to toddlers, to school-aged children. Continue that research as your child grows to help you know what to expect at all ages, as well as to learn helpful tips on how to manage and react in a positive way.

Once you are armed with a plan to continue with school involvement and have done the research to help guide you through this journey, taking the following 10 steps can also help facilitate a smooth transition:

**1 ■ As a family, create new household rules to fit the new school year.** This includes a daily homework routine, responsibility for bringing home school communications/notifications, writing assignments in school planner (and, if necessary, having the teacher sign for completion), family expectations of grades, clearly set rewards and consequences for behaviors.

## 2. Thou shalt not over commit.

As kids move to middle school, it's important to understand that more time will be needed to complete homework and to study for quizzes and tests. Limit the number of extracurricular activities your child is involved in to allow time for your child to successfully manage school, family, and friends. As parents, we need to help our children understand the importance of living a balanced life, even if we ourselves may struggle with this.

## 3. Have your child set their own homework time for each day of the week.

Allow your child to set a scheduled time he/she will complete homework each week night. Start with a 1-hour block, and if needed, increase that time. Keep in mind that works best for us may not work best for our kids. Allow your child time (if needed) to have a short break after school and perhaps a snack to help curb hunger during a study session.

## 4. Own up to that time.

Once your child has set his or her scheduled homework time for each day of the week, he/she will need to own that time. This means that although the homework may be completed in 30 minutes, your child will still need to fulfill that 1 hour commitment. Most likely, notebooks will need to be organized, notes should be re-read (if not re-written), and past assignments reviewed for deeper understanding.

## 5. Redefine the use of the kitchen table.

Have your child complete homework at the kitchen table, or other "public" location in your house. Allowing kids to work in their bedroom will prove to be ineffective as kids will find many things to distract them from the work at hand.

## 6. Reality check.

Do not allow your child to have a computer or cell phone out while completing homework. Your child will argue that they need these devices for one reason or another, but very rarely will this be the case. Allow your child a few minutes online to access homework postings or call a friend to verify an assignment, but aside from those few minutes, these tools are not necessary to successfully complete homework and will only waste valuable time.

## 7. Plan your work, then work your plan.

It's amazing how much time our kids can waste getting out materials needed for completing homework, transitioning from one assignment to another, and allowing (if not welcoming) distractions to throw them off course. Regain that time by having your child start his/her homework session making a list of what needs to be accomplished, and then prioritizing the items. This is what is called, "Planning your work." Once this has been done, it's all a

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matter of "working your plan," to successfully complete the assignments with minimal time loss.

## 8. Take on an active role in your child's daily homework routine.

Middle school is not the time to back away and have your child take on the responsibility of school alone. If anything, this is the time when kids need us the most! Take on a supportive role in your child's homework routine. Help your child create a list of

homework to be done each night and give praise and encouragement when each task is completed. Kids are not born knowing how to tackle numerous assignments, prioritize, and break large assignments into smaller, do-able chunks, so they can quickly become overwhelmed and emotional. Model these organizational skills to your child daily in a nurturing, loving way.

## 9. Keep supplies on hand.

Nothing can kill the momentum of a successful homework session faster than having to drop everything and run to the nearest drug store for materials! Create an "at home" bucket or drawer at the beginning of the year that is full of all the things your child will need at home to complete any and all homework assignments. Replenish these supplies in January at the start of the new year.

## 10. Be consistent.

As parents, we know all too well that nothing works without consistency. If we were not consistent in our efforts, our children would still be in diapers, right? The same goes for any routine that we oversee. Keep the routine simple, clean, and easy to follow with clear-cut guidelines for expectations, rewards, and consequences that are all created prior to the heat of the moment. Then, all that's left to do is follow through. Sure, life may rattle our routines from time to time, but invest time into creating a strong, solid routine to fall back on when "life" happens.

Lastly, embrace this stage of your child's development and when possible, expose mistakes that you, too, might make in life. It will bring you and your child closer and allow your child to see that making mistakes and learning from them is a life-long process. Remember that your children are your most precious investment. They will always need your guidance and support, and by providing it, your kids will become strong, happy adults. Sure, your kids will have favorite teachers throughout their school years but never forget that you will always be your child's favorite teacher. Teachers have your child for only one brief school year....you, however, have them for a lifetime.

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