

Moving Up to Middle School

The step from elementary to middle school can be a big one, but these tips will help ease the transition for both parents and children.

by Patti Ghezzi



Your child is headed to middle school. Don't panic! You can take steps to make sure you and your child are ready.

Mark Terry, principal of Eubanks Intermediate School in Southlake, Texas, has been helping families make a seamless transition from elementary school to 6th grade for years. The secret: getting parents inside the school. "The thing we find the most successful is simply communicating with parents," he says. "They feel like their kids will get lost, and we want to assure them that they won't."

Here are Terry's tips for keeping cool while your child makes the leap to middle school:

1. Lockers are a major source of anxiety for students. Buy your child a combination lock so he can practice over the summer. Once at school, he'll have a new combination to learn, but he'll be confident he can get into his locker quickly.
2. Learn the dress code. New middle school students also stress out about fashion. They want the latest styles, while parents want them to dress demurely. Check with the school and find out what type of clothing is allowed. Take note of what 7th graders are wearing, shop accordingly, and try to let your child win the battle of the wardrobe.
3. Middle school students have more opportunities for extracurricular activities. Talk to your child about what interests she would like to cultivate.

4. Remind your child that she won't be the only new kid at school. Everyone in her grade will be new. "We go back to the Girl Scouts: 'Make new friends and keep the old, some are silver and the other gold,' " says Terry.
5. Familiarize yourself with how middle school operates. Does your school have team teaching? Vertical teaming? Do students have a different teacher for every academic subject? Or do some teachers teach both math and science or language arts as well as social studies? How does the school communicate with parents? Are homework and project assignments posted online?
6. If your child is less than enthusiastic about the school, check out the school spirit shop and purchase some T-shirts for the family. Wear them all summer. By identifying yourself as a future Cougar or Raider, you might meet other families at the local pizza place or at the pool.
7. Get to know the middle school kids in your neighborhood. Chances are they're good kids and there's nothing to be afraid of. "Once parents get into the building they're like, "These are nice kids," Terry says.
8. Help your child learn the invaluable lifelong skill of being organized. Many kids who struggle in middle school have problems with organization. They get overwhelmed, procrastinate, and don't ask for help until it's too late. Give your child some summer responsibilities that will help him build time-management and other organizational skills.
9. Join the PTO. Many parents think they aren't needed or wanted at the middle school, but that's not true, Terry says. He wants parents involved. His teachers want parents involved. And kids, believe it or not, want their parents involved.
10. Don't fall prey to neighborhood rumors about the middle school. Find out the facts for yourself by visiting the school and talking to the principal. Terry has had to squelch rumors that students are rewarded when their parents do their projects for them. He assured nervous parents that teachers know when parents do their child's work and that they do not reward cheating. "Don't listen to gossip," he says.

Enrolling your child in middle school is scary. It's a bigger school. Your child will go from being one of the oldest kids in school to being one of the youngest. The homework load will probably increase. The pace will speed up. The good news? Your child is ready. With your support, your child will rise to the challenge.