

Good grief – I have a middle schooler! How will we all survive?

Important things to know about— Getting a good start in middle school

- Understanding your child's growing pains.
- Why families matter and what they can do to help.
- How to help your child succeed in 6th grade.
- How to help your child take charge of school work.

What's up with middle schoolers?

Everything! Their bodies are changing. Their brains and emotions are changing. They are insecure and often self-absorbed. They spend hours on end looking in the mirror, or they sit in their rooms brooding about who they are. Probably both. They want you to stay close to them **and** they want to be independent and make their own decisions.

Changing bodies

Voices change, hair grows in new places, and hormones make them sweaty one moment and exhausted the next. So much change in so little time leads them to wonder if they are normal.

We would wonder too, if in the next 2 to 4 years we would grow 10-20 inches, gain 20-40 pounds, our hands and feet would outgrow the rest of our bodies, and we would ache all the time from the final fusing of our tailbones.

The fact is, children go through more changes between the ages of 11 and 14 than they do at any other time except for the time from birth to 3 years.

Changing brains and emotions

From time to time, you may be wondering what is going on in their heads. You are not alone. Brain researchers have been surprised by the huge changes going on inside the teen brain. Perhaps most sur-

prising—teen brains are not completely wired until their early 20's! So don't be mad at them. Teen brains have not yet developed enough to keep track of multiple ideas. ***That is why teens have trouble deciding what to do first, second, and third. They leap before they look. Be there to stop them.***

They are also joyful, spontaneous, and funny. But they do tend to act impulsively, and they can't always recognize another person's emotions. You may need to tell them when you are upset.

All these changes mean that teens need ***lots of sleep*** to cope with growing bodies and changing minds and emotion. And yes, their moods go up and down, but this is normal. Give them a break. Give yourself a break too. Their moods will pass. Listen, reassure them, and love them.

The power of parents

What can parents do? ***A great deal.*** Starting with giving love, patience, and guidance—now more than ever. As experts suggest: ***most things in their lives are changing, don't let your love be one of them.***

Middle schoolers still crave what they craved as children: love, ***lots*** of attention, listening (rule of thumb: listen three times as much as you talk), good advice, ***lots*** of help with organization. Should you worry if they are happy or unhappy on any given day? Not really. Don't be upset just because they are upset. Stay calm. What's important to check on is their ***overall*** well-being. You can use the three C's as a guide: Connection, Choices, and Competency.

Are they ***connected*** to you, other family members, and their community? Do they have real and meaningful ***choices***? All children need to have some control over their lives to be happy. Finally, and most importantly, do they have a place where they get to be really ***competent*** and ***shine***?

Some kids get this in school, some don't. All the more important then, that they have a chance to be the best caretaker, the best car washer, the best pet owner, best choir member, or simply the best at *something*. ***Everyone, but everyone, needs to be seen as good at something in order to feel good about themselves.***

Parents are the best at helping their children identify their interests. How? By watching what they love to do. Notice when they are really excited about something or love doing something so much that they want to do it again and again. Those are the moments that point to your child's inborn talents and skills. When they do something that stands out tell them: *Hey, you have a talent for singing!* [or storytelling, building things, fixing things, etc.] *This is a talent you can use later in life.* Your devotion to your children and their interests is the first step in the education and career planning process.

Making a good transition

Getting to grade 5 was easy. Now for grade 6.

First, don't think you can cut and run. Your children need you more than ever. Don't try to hold hands with them in the hallway or give them a kiss when you drop them at school. Instead, think more about being your child's backup, support, and audience. The authors of *The Rollercoaster Years* suggest: *Parents should be seen but not heard.*

There is no reason to be afraid of the 6th grade, but there is a real need to prepare. Here's how:

- Be positive about the new school.
- Be sure to attend school orientation.
- Help your children know how to find their lockers, the bathrooms, and the lunchroom.
- Make sure they know their bus route.

Help your children practice being responsible. Let them pack their own backpacks, make their own lunches, and work out a plan for doing their homework. Listen to their fears, take them seriously, and then help them figure out how to cope.

Middle school is a big change for all of you. Patience, love, and humor will go a long way.

Educational planning for the 6th grade

Okay. Your Middle schooler has found their locker, can manage the bus route, and makes it from English to Math on time. Now, how about school success? How can parents help?

First, talk up school! Talk about the strong link between good academic skills and a good life. Math rules!

Next, help them organize! Incomplete brains have a very hard time organizing anything. You can help them by asking them questions such as:

- *What homework assignments do you have?*
- *When are they due?*
- *What does each assignment need to include?*
- *How long do you think it will take?*
- *What supplies do you need?*

By asking these questions, and helping your children organize their time, their homework space, and their supplies, you will help them know what to do first, second, and third.

Keep stressing the importance of reading, writing, and ***math!*** Good skills help children feel good about themselves. Good skills prepare children to go to college. ***Math skills*** are the key to good jobs, and good incomes. You can help your children succeed by working with them to develop strong skills. Did you know that more than 70% of children who take algebra and geometry in middle school go on to college? And good readers can learn to do anything, their whole lives long.

Take heart. Loving and listening to your child is half the battle. Right now, your children's job is to grow and change. Your jobs are to be their cheering section, coach them in taking responsibility and getting organized, and to stress the importance of school. This is the first step toward success.

Two magic ingredients needed to raise happy, successful kids? Love and Math!

Ask your child—

What are you good at? What are you ***best*** at?
What do you love to do on your own?