



Making the Best of Big Transitions

August 2009 Newsletter 1

In this newsletter, we want to cover three major parent-child transitions.

- Preparing for the **First Day of School**
- Surviving the **Middle School Challenge**
- Helping your student leave for **College**

Of course, each of these major milestones brings a mixture of excitement and fear, which affects both parent and child.

We hope these tips will be helpful, whether you are a parent going through one of these life phases or a friend who wants to be supportive.

Five Tips to Prepare for First-Day Separation

Eventually the time comes when we leave our children with other adults for a prolonged time. The separation is always challenging. The first day of preschool or kindergarten adds another stressor. From now on, the love of our life is out of our reach on a scheduled, routine basis.

To make the transition easier, you may want to consider these five opportunities to reduce separation jitters:

1. Visit the pre-school or kindergarten in advance – twice.
You've probably already attended an orientation or have plans to attend one during the next few weeks. In addition, why not arrange to take your child to school a second time? Show your child where the bathroom, classroom and cafeteria are located and then practice going to and from the classroom several times, pointing out reference points along the way.
2. Show your child where to go to catch the ride home.
3. Obtain the school rules and go over them at least twice before the first day of school.
4. Try to introduce your child to the teacher before the first day of school. If you can, try to do this outside the view of other parents and students so your child can feel more confident.
5. Together, label everything, pack the backpack, lay out clothes and plan the important lunch box items the evening before. Create a necklace with your child's name and your phone number or place a business card in your child's pocket so your child knows you're only a phone call away. Tuck a picture of your family or of a favorite pet in the backpack. As you prepare, visit with your child about positive experiences you enjoyed when you first started school, focusing on best friends and exciting things you learned. If you build tomorrow's school preparation into a nightly ritual, your child will eventually develop great organizational habits.

Preparing for Middle School

Middle School is a challenging time with almost no buffer between childhood and young adult. Without warning, teachers expect students to be mature and responsible. Consequences for poor behavior can be severe. Our still-innocent children are thrust into a much larger population with new students and a broad range of ages, new social risks, several classes, tight schedules and multiple faculty members. Oh, and all this change occurs just as our children are beginning to struggle with the strong emotions that tag alongside the miracle of puberty.

These ten tips can help ease middle school stress:

1. Teach your student how to use a planner. Because organization is critical to survival in middle school, review the planner together every evening. Keeping the tone very conversational, go over each class with your child just to double-check assignments as most middle school students forget details, such as tomorrow's quiz or science project.
2. Before school starts, develop and photocopy multiple homework turn-in lists. Similar to a to-do list, a turn-in list includes eight check boxes and adjacent blank lines. Homework is listed on a blank line as soon as it's finished, e.g., algebra workbook pages 42-44. The following day, your middle school student checks off the assignment as soon as it is handed in. The turn-in list can be very important. Middle school is a time when students often spend valuable hours at home to finish their homework and then forget to turn it in.
3. Review the school handbook with your middle school student. Discuss together what the punishment at home will be should your child violate the rules so your child can trust the consistent consequences.
4. You may wish to postpone school shopping until after the first day of school. Instead, your child may wish to go to school with only a notebook, pencil and pen. Because your student will have several teachers, odds are at least some of them will require specific items. Plus, middle school backpacks can become extremely heavy. It often is better to analyze what is needed for classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday separately from those on Tuesday and Thursday. Then, your student can purchase notebooks and other supplies to keep the daily weight at a minimum since there may be no opportunity to go to a locker between classes.
5. Middle school is about developing socially, academically and emotionally. Encourage your child to select electives that seem exciting and personally fulfilling.

6. Stay as calm as possible when your child stumbles. Odds are, a teacher will call you or send a note home during these very interesting years as most middle school students are not as compliant as the handbook recommends. This also may be a time when you will be encouraged to visit with a school counselor and/or psychologist. Quite often, you may hear that your child is immature. Children develop at different rates. You may always call the office if you have any questions.
7. Insist on daily private time with your middle school student. You will want to stay connected with your child during this exciting and yet trying phase because so much is happening all at once.
8. Praise 14 times for each time you have to reprimand your middle school student. Middle school students can be insecure and less than confident. Parents can provide some tremendous self-esteem support by magnifying the good moments during such an impressive transition period.
9. Commit to one final consistent rule: If your child is going somewhere after school, you must always know where your student is. Make sure this single rule is enforced with memorable punishment. After all, this teaches that we protect those we trust from unnecessary worry. It will serve your child well in interpersonal relationships throughout life.
10. Enjoy the journey with your child. Share your experiences with the awkwardness of middle school and help your child keep this very short time in perspective. Point out that each phase of life gives us an opportunity to learn something about ourselves and that, one day, each lesson will help us become a stronger person.

Finally, Graduation to the College Years

Now, it's going to be up to your child what to eat, when to eat, who to choose as friends, how many hours to study, how much sleep they need, whether to party, whether to respect everything you've taught them, etc. Now, it's time for them to ask, "Who am I when my family isn't around?"

How do you best support this search for independent identity?

1. Listen loyally, but don't react too quickly.
2. Try to give advice only when asked.
3. Trust them even when you struggle with their choices.
College students are learning adult interpersonal relationship skills as well as financial and time management skills and, as they progress, they're going to learn from their mistakes.
4. Continue to model healthy relationships.
5. Try not to be too critical of how they handle money. If they get into trouble, try to give them space to solve their problems before you step in to help.
6. Try to be sensitive to your need to stay in touch. You'll obviously want to communicate, but try to limit the contact to no more than two times a week in order to give your child time to take this significant step in life. If you feel a need to communicate more often, select great cards (mail is always a treat) or fun e-mails.

Empty Nest Syndrome

When our children leave home and no longer need us for all-day nurturing, protection and shuttling, life is really never the same again. Despite our resolve, we have sacrificed our time, our hobbies, our priorities and our relationships in order to parent our children, and, for the most part, we have cherished every moment. We may look forward to the freedom and, at the same time, miss the magic of being there for our children.

In a nutshell, it is natural to feel sadness. It's normal to weep. It's logical to journey into the child's bedroom and sit on the bed, missing the noise and even the messiness.

Meanwhile, call us if you believe you or your spouse may have Empty Nest Syndrome. (Keep in mind fathers are statistically more affected by children leaving home as they often aren't prepared for it.)

These are signs of Empty Nest Syndrome:

- You find yourself crying a lot;
- You don't feel like participating in your normal routine;
- You have trouble sleeping;
- You feel useless;
- Your marriage feels empty.

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