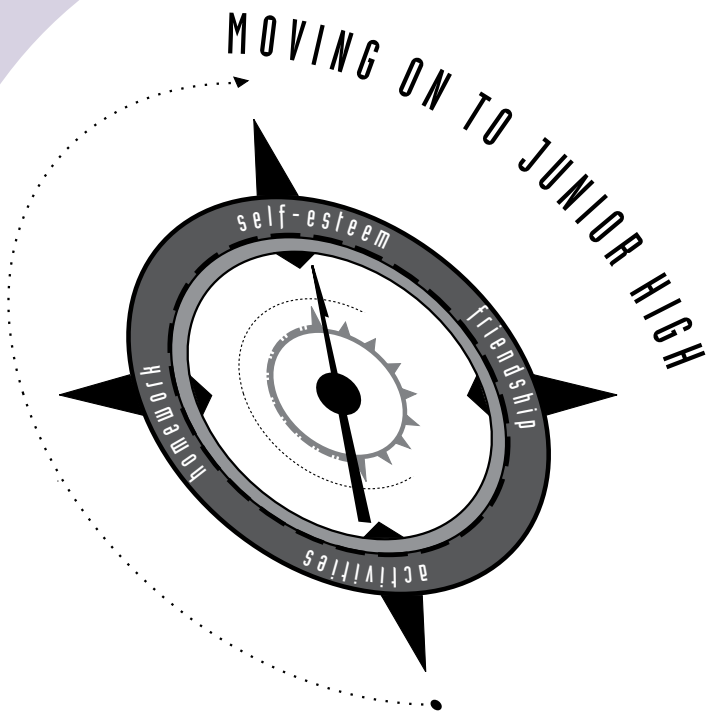


G A T E W A Y I S S U E 2

G A T E W A Y
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE



P A R E N T I N G I N T O T H E T E E N Y E A R S
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE



What can I expect when my child starts junior high or middle school?

The start of middle school or junior high is an event that most children look forward to. This change signifies a move toward being more grown-up. No longer is your child going to elementary school with younger children. Even though your child seems genuinely excited about going to a new school, you also may sense that he or she has some worries as well. You, too, may feel uncertain: What can you expect from your child during the change in schools?

- Even though most young teens look forward to starting junior high or middle school, some aspects of the change may be difficult. If your child has some difficulties, he or she is not alone. Concerns are quite common.
- Parents should not be surprised if there is some slippage in grades as their teen adjusts to a new school. During this change, your teen has many things to think about and figure out in terms of the school, the teachers, teachers' expectations, and even who his or her friends will be. Because these demands compete for your teen's attention, grades may slip.
- Your child may be less involved in extracurricular activities than when in elementary school. Because your child is now among the youngest students in the school, he or she may feel intimidated about participating in activities that he or she enjoyed previously. Or it may just take some time to figure out what activities the new school offers. Your encouragement may help your teen become involved in these activities.
- Your child's self-esteem may become a little lower during this change. This decline is caused by the many adjustments your teen is making. Encouragement from parents is very important to keep teens feeling good about themselves!

Remember: Supporting (rather than criticizing) your child as he or she starts middle school or junior high school can help make the transition more successful!

Why do some teens find the change to middle school or junior high challenging?

Even though most young teens look forward to moving on to middle school or junior high school, making the change to a new school isn't easy for some kids. Teens may find the change challenging for several reasons:

In junior high or middle school, kids are no longer in the same class all day with the same teacher and group of classmates. For most kids, the elementary school classroom gives a very secure feeling. The people they are with all day know them very well, and teachers can develop a closeness with the children. In the junior high or middle school, every class period may present a completely new set of faces and expectations to learn. Because the school is organized this way, your child may feel that teachers care less about him or her than the teachers did in elementary school. It's easy to see why your child might find this arrangement daunting!

Junior high schools and middle schools tend to be larger than elementary schools. That means your child must interact with many more people every day. When starting junior high or middle school, many students look at the large number of students surrounding them and feel as if nobody knows them.

Your child is no longer one of the older, more experienced students in the school. Now, he or she is among the youngest. Your child may feel that this position is less valued than the position he or she was in last year in elementary school. Older teens may also tease the younger teens at a middle or junior high school.

There is a greater demand for your child to be independent. Your child is no longer the focus of a teacher's attention for the entire day. Teachers may expect your child to complete more work and follow through on assignments with less supervision than in the lower grades.



Starting junior high or middle school may cause difficulties for kids who are already experiencing some other major change in their lives. If you are the parent of a child undergoing any of the following changes, you may want to provide extra support during the change to middle school or junior high.

— **Parents divorcing.** If you and your spouse are going through a divorce, your child is trying to adjust to those changes as well as the new school. To get a better idea of your child's view, you might think about it this way: Suppose, besides getting your divorce, you were starting a new job that was more demanding than your old one. How do you think you would feel? How would you cope? For a child whose parents are divorcing and who is beginning a new junior high or middle school, the experience may be very similar.

— **Becoming a stepfamily.** A teen who is adjusting to a stepfamily may also experience some difficulties with the change to middle school or junior high. Your child may be trying to figure out his or her relationship with a new stepparent, adjusting to rules set up by the stepparent, and also adjusting to stepsiblings in the household. These changes, by themselves, are big ones for a teen. When combined with a change in school, it's easy to see why it may take some time for your teen to adjust!

— **Onset of puberty.** Children who are going through rapid pubertal change may have more difficulty starting middle school or junior high. Your child is trying to figure out what teachers expect, class schedules, and who his or her friends are at the new school. If this occurs during a period of rapid physical development, your teen also may be worrying about bodily changes that seem totally out of control!

How can I help my child successfully make the change to middle school or junior high?

According to adolescence authorities Laurence Steinberg and Ann Levine, there are some things you can do to help your child make this change successfully.

- Before the school year begins, take time to talk with your teen about how the new school may be different. Talk about moving from one classroom to another, having a different teacher for each subject, and meeting more kids. This will give your child some idea of what to expect.
- Get involved with the new school. If your child sees you are interested and want to participate in school events, he or she may be more accepting of the new situation. You will also learn more about the school, which can benefit both you and your child.
- Probably not all of your child's friends will attend the same new school. Find out who will go to your child's middle or junior high school, and help your child keep friendships going with these kids over the summer. Going to a new school is easier if there are a few familiar faces in the crowd!
- Help your child work independently at home. During elementary school, you and the teacher may have been readily available to help your child. Now, he or she needs to know how to work on projects alone, without the help of an adult. Encourage your child to plan and carry out school projects with less help than in the lower grades.
- Avoid getting upset with your child if grades drop slightly. This happens to many teens as they adjust to the new school. Talk with your child calmly about the reasons for grade slippage. Be supportive. Help your child figure out ways to complete assignments and study in this new school environment. If you feel unsure about how to help with assignments and studying, a teacher or principal may be able to make suggestions.



Junior High: a CHALLENGING transition...

...a **SUCCESSFUL** transition

How can I help my child be successful in junior high or middle school?

As a parent, you know the value of a good education. You know that your child needs a sound educational background to be successful. Many parents want to find ways of helping their children succeed in school. You can foster this success through general parenting practices, the encouragement you provide, your involvement in your child's school, and the help that you give your child on homework.



General parenting practices

People parent in many different ways. When we look at children who succeed in school, however, we find that their parents share two important traits. First, these parents have a very warm relationship with their children. They spend much time talking with their children, supporting their children's efforts and accomplishments, and demonstrating by their actions that they are truly interested in their children.

The second parenting characteristic that these successful kids benefit from is their parents' high expectations for their behavior. These parents let their children know in very clear terms that they expect them to behave in certain ways, both at school and in other areas of life. However, these expectations are always appropriate for the age of the child. For example, these parents would not expect a 5-year-old to do the family's laundry. But they might expect their 5-year-old to put dirty clothes in the hamper when he or she takes them off.

We'll talk more about these parenting practices in a later issue.

Parental encouragement

Encouraging your teen can also help your teen adjust to a new school. You can encourage your teen in these ways:

- **Be generous with praise.** It is important to give more positive comments than negative ones to your adolescent. Don't make up things to praise your child or praise something that requires no effort. Instead, look for what your child has done well or worked hard on and then express praise. If your child hasn't succeeded in doing what he or she set out to do, you can still offer praise. For example, use positive phrases such as "I can tell you worked very hard." or "You're getting much better at that." Praising in this way recognizes your child's efforts. This may give the boost your teen needs to try even harder at mastering a difficult task.
- **Encourage your child's personal best.** But remember, in school or at home, personal best doesn't mean perfect. Learning does not always mean high grades. You must let your child make mistakes at times and learn from them. In encouraging your teen's personal best, let him or her know your attitudes about school attendance, education, and involvement. Letting your teen know your standards often makes an impression.



— **Show interest in school work.** Take time to talk with your teen about school each day. Have your child show you class work and tell you about it. Show interest and appreciation for what your teen is achieving in school.

Getting involved in your child's school

Another important way you can influence your teen's school success is by being involved in your child's school. In fact, parental involvement in school has been found to be an important factor in a child's success at all grade levels. Children do better in school and have a more positive attitude about school if their parents are involved in the school. Good parent-school relationships have a positive effect, not only on the child but also on the parent and the teacher.

Usually parents of a child in the elementary grades participate in various school activities. However, many parents participate less or not at all once their children enter junior high. You may want to be more involved in your child's education but find this challenging. If you're a working parent, you may feel you have no time or energy for school involvement. If your financial situation is a little shaky, you may feel as if you don't have the money to contribute to school activities. Perhaps you feel uncertain about how to become involved. Or maybe you feel that you don't have the skills to offer assistance. Finally, you might feel that the school doesn't need your help.

Even though your first steps toward getting involved may feel awkward, it is important to be involved in your child's education. Here are some suggested ways you can become involved in your teen's junior high or middle school:

- Attend parent-teacher or parent-counselor conferences.
- Go to open houses, school concerts, sport activities, or other school events.
- Send notes or call your child's teachers—not only when something negative occurs but also when you have a positive remark to tell the teachers.
- Help in the school cafeteria, office, library, or wherever else you might be needed.
- Be a part of fund-raising events by donating money or items or by volunteering time.
- Participate in PTO/PTA, Music Boosters, Athletic Boosters, or other parent groups that support the school.
- Attend school board meetings and keep informed on school issues.
- Become a member of the school board or an advisory committee.
- Volunteer to help at special events like sports activities, music contests, or dances.
- Help chaperone a class trip.
- Coach a team or advise a school club.
- Ask the teacher or principal to suggest other ways you can become involved.

The way you become involved in the school depends on the time that you have available, the talents you can offer, the needs of the school, and the staff's ability to welcome your efforts. Start thinking about what you can do, and start participating! Both you and your child will benefit.

do **your** Homework

Do's and don'ts of homework help

A final way you can help your child succeed in school is by encouraging him or her to complete homework. As parents, it's sometimes difficult to know how much and what kind of homework help we should offer young teens.

? *What should I avoid when helping with homework?*

— It is important for you to monitor your child's homework skills, but **never do homework for your adolescent.**

— Don't play the role of teacher with your child. It often produces conflict between the two of you. You may be teaching your child to do something in a different way from the teacher. This contrast may just confuse your teen more. Your teen may become dependent on you for help and see him- or herself as helpless.

— Don't check every assignment for mistakes. If you check all assignments, the teacher may get the wrong impression of how much your teen understands.

? *What can I do to help my child with homework?* You can help your child by helping him or her study for a test, by listening to oral reports, by proofreading papers, by giving spelling words, or by discussing a problem.

Here are other ways to help your child improve his or her study skills. (Perhaps you don't feel confident helping your child with the actual homework assignment: These next suggestions don't require you to be familiar with the subject matter.)

— Encourage your teen to plan a daily routine—a regular time for doing homework—and stick to it. During the study time, turn off the TV and radio if possible. Some teens say they can concentrate only with background music. If this is the case, try to have your teen turn the volume down for less distraction.

— Keep a calendar listing family events as well as school project deadlines, athletic activities, midterm dates, and special lessons. This lets your teen see what is happening in your family life as well as school so he or she can schedule school work around important family or special events.

— Encourage your teen to write down all assignments and their due dates in an assignment book. Turning assignments in on time is important for success. Using an assignment book to write down assignments given during the day is very important.

— Provide your teen with a study place, such as a table or desk in a quiet place, with a good reading light and a comfortable chair. Make sure that all necessary school supplies are on hand to avoid lost time. If possible, store them in the study space or in one place where your teen can find them easily. We've provided some suggestions in our "Homework Kit for Adolescents."

— Provide your child with materials to organize school work. Successful students keep their school subjects separated from one another. They may use individual spiral notebooks, folders, or color-coded notebook dividers. Help your child devise a system for organizing class materials that works best for him or her. Provide the supplies to make the system work.



Homework kit for adolescents

When setting up a study area for your adolescent, make sure that the following supplies and equipment are available:

- Pens, pencils, erasers, sharpener, white correction fluid
- Colored pencils, crayons, markers
- Hole punch, stapler, scissors
- Writing paper, construction paper
- Glue or paste, tape, paper clips, rubber bands
- Assignment book, index cards, folders for reports
- Atlas, thesaurus, almanac, dictionary
- Compass, protractor, calculator

A final word about school transitions: What to do if problems arise

It is important for you to meet with your teen's teachers at the beginning of the school year to get to know them and what they expect from their students. Later, if you suspect that your teen isn't doing homework, isn't working to potential, or has behavior problems, contact the teachers again. Find out how your child is doing in their classes and what they think the problem might be.

If your child's problems involve academic skills, learning disabilities, behavior issues, drug or alcohol abuse, or limited English skills, the important first step is talking with and cooperating with your child's teachers and school principal. Teachers, principals, or school counselors can help you

- decide how serious your teen's problem is.
- figure out ways you can work with your child at home.
- decide if your teen needs further testing or evaluation.
- identify other resources in the school or community for helping your teen.

By accepting that your teen may be having a problem, you make the first step in helping your teen work through the problem. Turning to others for help can be one of the best ways to help. Don't be embarrassed or ashamed to admit you need help getting through it. Many parents experience similar situations with their teens. The main thing is to act as soon as you feel something may be wrong. Don't wait until it's too late!

Suggested reading

Becoming Part of Your Child's School, by Christiann Dean (1983); Ithaca, New York: Cooperative Extension Service, Cornell University.

G A T E

GATEWAY is a publication of the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service. Your comments and suggestions are welcome. Please address your correspondence to Nina Mounts, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, 1105 West Nevada Street, Urbana, Illinois 61801. Phone 217.244.7356. Fax 217.333.9061.

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