

# Kids' Biggest Middle School Fears

**Help ease the transition to a new school by tuning into what worries your child most.**

By Deborah Wilburn

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Whether your child starts middle school in 5th grade or 8th (and no matter how confident he is at the prospect), chances are there's something about it that has him scared silly. What concerns kids most, and how can parents help them work through their fears? An informal survey of parents, students, and experts who work with adolescents turned up the following:

1. [Combination locks](#)
2. [Being late for class](#)
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**1. Combination locks.** Many a pre-teen is terrified that she won't be able to get her locker open. As a result, she'll be stuck with no place to put her books, or she won't be able to retrieve needed materials for the next class or at the end of the day.

***What you can do:*** First, understand that this fear isn't completely unfounded. "Students do have limited time between classes," says Paige Swanson, a middle school counselor with Central Middle School in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Her advice? "Before school starts, buy your child a lock and let her play with it all summer so she's familiar with how it works." Adds one mom of a middle schooler: "My daughter went to school several times the week before school started just to get the locker combo down pat."

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**2. Being late for class.** Yes, preteens have loads of energy, but even they find it challenging to move from class to class on time. "You have to get to different classes in two minutes," says Skyler Moran, 11, a 6th grader in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. "I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do it." It's especially challenging if a kid also needs to stop at his locker (remember the lock challenge?) or visit the restroom. The consequence for lateness, at least in Skyler's school, is detention. No kid wants to get in trouble because he wasn't fast enough!

***What you can do:*** Reassure your child that he's not alone. Brainstorm ways to streamline the process. What will he do if he's not sure where a particular class is located? Who will he ask for directions (for example, the teacher of his previous class, or his advisor)? Is he good at keeping his books and papers organized? If not, help him [clean up the mess](#) so he doesn't waste precious minutes between classes. And remind him that he'll have to save socializing for lunchtime or after school.

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**3. Not having friends.** James (name changed) is a 7th grader in Murfreesboro whose main concern at the start of middle school was making friends. He says he was worried about "the new people I would meet, and not being part of the same group as in elementary school." Middle school can be an especially difficult time for girls, given the rotating nature of girls' friendships, the emergence of queen bees, and the shifting [social order](#).

***What you can do:*** "If your child's best friend is going to a different middle school, be sensitive to his loss," says Gemma Ainslie, Ph.D., a psychologist in Austin, Texas. Then try to focus on this time of new beginnings. You might ask, "Do you know anyone from your old school who is going to be there?" If she scoffs at your attempts to identify potentially friendly faces in the crowd, try to identify her fears and put them in perspective. You might say, "You had friends at your old school, what do you imagine might happen that you wouldn't you be able to make friends at the new one?" or "Are you worried that the kids from your elementary school won't want to be friends anymore?" Don't feel like you have to supply a steady stream of solutions. Sometimes it helps kids just to voice their fears to a sympathetic listener. Ainslie also recommends that parents point out areas where friends won't change, such as in a church youth group, dance class, or sports league.

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**4. Facing the cafeteria.** Akin to "no one will like me," many kids live in fear of walking into a crowded lunchroom, getting their tray, and then having nowhere to sit. Skyler, the Pennsylvania 6th grader, explains: "Kids separate themselves by groups — the cool kids, nerd kids, good kids, bad kids. Sometimes you can get kicked off a table." But Skyler has his own coping strategy: "I sit at a different table every day," he says.

***What you can do:*** Encourage your child to strategize ahead of time. Suzanne Smith, the parent of a 7th grader in Potsdam, New York, says lunchtime was a big issue for her shy daughter. "Eating lunch was fraught with social collapse," she says. "Social levels are established in this room and adolescents live and die by it." Smith says that "after a fair

amount of discussion," she suggested that her daughter talk to someone ahead of time to make a plan to sit together and avoid that moment of "where do I sit, where will I be welcome?" It seemed to work — but it's a process that Smith's daughter repeats at the beginning of each school year.

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**5. Being too different.** Nothing is worse for middle schoolers than standing out in a way they haven't chosen, which means anything at the far end of the "normal" curve. For a girl, it could mean being the tallest in the class or the most developed; for a boy, it could mean being the shortest or the clumsiest. At some schools, fashion is the arbiter of all things cool, and middle schoolers (especially girls) live in dread of showing up with the wrong backpack, brand of jeans, or style of shoes.

***What you can do:*** First, understand that tweens are a stage that marks the beginning of their search for an identity. "Until a young person is able to carve out an identity he is comfortable with, the mantra is 'don't stick out,'" says Lesa Rae Vartanian, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Indiana University-Purdue University in Fort Wayne, Indiana. "Kids who insist on 'being different' through odd hair color or clothing choices often aren't doing anything that unique," adds Vartanian. "They're just aligning with a slightly different group."

How, then, do you cope with a child obsessed with fitting in? First, whatever it is about your preteen's personality or appearance that concerns her, don't say, "That's silly," or "It doesn't matter." Minimizing her feelings (even with the best of intentions) will only make her feel more alone. Another no-no: Bromides like "just be yourself and everyone will love you." "Kids don't believe it," says Judith Baenen, head of St. Mary's Academy, a K-12 school in Englewood, Colorado. Not only that, but preteens' [self-esteem drops](#) during this time, due to a combination of hormonal activity (remember, too, that [puberty](#) is setting in) and brain development. "What they really need is your unconditional love and support," says Baenen. On a practical note, she advises parents not to buy their tween's entire wardrobe before school starts. "Wait until your child gets to school and sees what everyone else has," she says.

Finally, emphasize the positive as one way of boosting an insecure preteen's confidence. "Teach your children to think in terms of 'you are' statements rather than 'you should be,'" says Theresa Thorkildsen, professor of education and psychology at the University of Illinois in Chicago. If, for example, a boy is small in stature but fast on the playing field, his parents could coach him to view his size as an asset rather than a liability.

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**6. Tough classes.** Some kids worry that they won't be able to keep up academically. "There's more pressure, and it's a little scary," says Skyler, whose good grades suggest that he's adjusted to his new environment. A child who is nervous about the increased workload may worry that there will be too much reading, or that he got good grades in elementary school not because he was smart, but because the teachers liked him. "This may be especially true for kids who put all their eggs in the academic basket," says Gemma Ainslie. "These kids, as well as those who had trouble in elementary school, are more likely to be anxious about keeping up."

***What you can do:*** There's certainly nothing wrong with acknowledging that the work will be harder (it will be!), but assure your child that it won't be more than she can handle. Remind her that while being a good student is important, she has other strengths as well — perhaps she loves to draw, or plays soccer — so that her entire sense of self isn't wrapped up in grades. Encourage her to let her teacher —and you — know if she thinks she needs extra help, or if she's falling behind. That way you can take steps to address problems early on, perhaps by having her meet with a teacher after school, or working with a [tutor](#).

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**7. Getting lost.** It can be terrifying for kids to start a new school where they don't know anyone and aren't sure where they're supposed to be at any given time. Amy Rea, the mother of a 7th grader in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, says her son was most afraid of losing his way and being late. "The school is pretty big, and this was the first year he had to change rooms for every class," she says.

***What you can do:*** First, find out what programs the middle school has in place for orienting new students. At the school Rea's son attends, kids were first bused over at the end of 6th grade and given a tour. Then, the week before school started, they received their schedules and there was an open house when kids could find their locker and all their rooms. "We went to the open house, but the place was packed and it was overwhelming," says Rea. However, students were allowed to visit throughout that week — which Rea and her son did, walking the path from class to class several times, with pit stops at his locker where he practiced opening the lock. Rea's advice? "Take practice runs, especially when it's not crowded. It makes a big difference."

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