

Parents Matter

Volume 1, No. 13



Successful Transitions into Secondary School: Helping Students with Academic Challenges

Many parents dread the middle school years. Students' hormones are raging, the social scene heats up, and the academic pressure builds, which together can create a perfect storm. Often, we (and our children) simply need to ride out these years, yet there are a few things we can do to minimise the bumps along the way. Here are some suggestions to help with the academic piece of the equation.

Firstly, helping our children develop systems is critical for their academic success. Because they will most likely have multiple teachers in various classrooms, their ability to stay organised and communicate with their teachers is critical. Showing them how to use a daily planner will help them track assignments, tests, and due dates. If your child is given an assignment on Tuesday that is due Friday, have him write down the assignment under Tuesday's column and then draw a continuous line from Tuesday, across Wed., Thurs and into Friday to create a visual cue in the planner of how much time is available to complete the work. Encourage them to write down test and quiz dates in bold colours so that they stand out. It's also helpful if they plan and record when they will study for upcoming exams, in addition to regular homework assignments. Learning to juggle homework, independent study time, and outside obligations is part of middle school and having a system to do so will help them.

Teach them to communicate with their teachers and role play the conversations at home if necessary. When they know they will be absent, encourage them to discuss what they will be missing and how they plan to make up the work ahead of time with each teacher. A mantra from a school where I've worked is: Communicate early, communicate often!

If they've been out of school for several days due to an illness, encourage them to make a chart with each class that has a space for what was done at school and what was assigned for homework each evening and go to each teacher to find out how to begin making up the work. If they struggle with homework, resist jumping in and doing it for them. Ask them what they know about the problem, how is it similar to what they've done in the past and what do their notes, books, and other materials suggest about tackling the challenge? The goal is for them to become independent problem solvers. You can also coach them to be resourceful by asking them, "When can you talk to your teacher about this problem?" "Is there tutoring available after school?" or "Who can you form a study group with?"

And finally, help them to look forward. When things spiral out of control - your child has a maths and science test tomorrow and forgot to bring her maths book home, she doesn't understand the instructions for her English paper revision, and she forgot to turn in the permission slip and money for tomorrow's field trip - and all four wheels of her bus threaten to fall off at once, it's all right. Secondary school is a great time for things to fall apart. As parents, we want to fix things, rush in and rescue our sinking child. However, we're often more helpful if instead of jumping in to save the day (or late night!), we ask the question, "What can you do differently next time?" If we approach the situation calmly, without judgment, letting them know that learning to juggle these responsibilities is part of their growth, we can help them think about where they could do things differently, what systems for organisation will help them and what additional supports up front will help them stay on top of their increasingly demanding lives.

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Another Parent Tip From...

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