

STEPHANIE SAYS



Finding the Middle Ground...

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When it comes to making the transition from elementary school to middle school, endless emotions commonly flood the minds of parents and students alike. Not only are they starting to experience hormonal and emotional changes, but now they are making a significant environmental change. School as they know it is getting ready to change drastically. As you know from making this transition yourself as an adolescent, the difference between fifth and sixth grade can be intimidating. For some students it's an exciting time, but for many it's a combination of several emotions, and with good reason. The changes that lie ahead can be an emotional rollercoaster for the entire family, but it doesn't have to be an overwhelming time. A positive transition is dependent on preparation and family involvement.

Helpful Tips For Parents:

Be involved - This is a time when our children are expected to become more responsible and independent. They will need your help in learning how to navigate and balance it all. We don't want children to give up because they are overwhelmed or can't figure it out. According to a report from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, despite socioeconomic status, students with parents involved in their education have higher grade point averages, have better behavior management skills and are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education.

Talk often and ask questions - Your child has questions and is curious! It's never too late to start talking about relationships, sex, drugs, or whatever their friends are sharing at school. It doesn't have to be a formal, discussion. It's actually much easier than that. It's a door you can open while driving in the car starting with something like "It looks like you've had a lot on your mind lately. Is there anything you would like to talk about?" Your child is likely to quickly say no or look at you like you are out of your mind, but they will remember that you offered to help. That being said, don't only open the door for discussion once. Pay attention to your child's behavior and present an opportunity to talk when you're feeling it's a good time to do so. Be the primary provider of information about your child's concerns. You may not always have the answers to their questions, so it's ok to tell them you're not sure what to say or how to help, but you'll be happy to find out.

Look for warning signs-

- Difficulty completing tasks or assignments
- Decrease in grades
- Struggles with maintaining friendships
- Wants to avoid going to school
- Unexplained cuts or bruises
- Change in sleep patterns, appetite or weight

If you observe any of these warning signs or suspect social, emotional or academic trouble with your child, it is best to schedule an appointment with their teacher, guidance counselor or pediatrician. These may be indications of learning or processing disabilities, bullying, or self-harm. Your instinct may be to justify changes in your child's appearance or behavior as just being "a stage," but in these cases it is better to error on the side of caution rather than being wrong about a cry for help.

Support For Students:

Get involved- Everyone has a need to feel a sense of belonging. Positive peer interaction will give you an opportunity to build friendships, find common interests with others and establish meaning in your life. Beyond building a social connection, you will be building your self-confidence by taking pride in the role you play in your team's accomplishments, so if you find yourself trying to fit in and find new friends, you may want to try getting involved in a school activity or club.

Make decisions with caution - Be careful when making a decision because "everyone else is doing it." It may seem that "everyone" is doing what your friends are doing, but trust me, your friends are not everyone. Make decisions based on knowing right from wrong, and your own personal values. If you are uncomfortable or questioning the things that your friends are doing, then it's time to start hanging out with people that are not making poor decisions. Friends can't protect you from your own consequences.

Ask for help - Talk to someone if you are feeling overwhelmed, sad, anxious or just not yourself. There is no need to suffer or push yourself through an issue alone. Sharing your struggles can help you feel more hopeful and give you some ideas of healthy ways to handle your concerns. Remember, the chances that you are the only one feeling the way you do is highly unlikely.

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 1-800-273-8255 (TALK) if you should ever feel you are in a crisis and need to talk to someone. 🙋