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BY NOW YOUR 6TH GRADER REMEMBERS the combination to his locker and is getting settled into some semblance of a routine. You've reassured your child that her fears are normal. Getting to new classrooms on time, remembering which homework to bring home which day are hallmarks of the transition to middle school.

In the coming weeks you can observe your tweens and teens for some signs that they may have more going on than just the usual stress of adjusting to new schools. Many parents wonder when their child is crossing the line from "normal" to "something I should be worried about." Generally, parents know their children well and can tune in to subtle changes in personality, habits, or types of complaints. It's a challenge not to over-react or under-react, so trust your intuition.

First, it helps to understand some of what the kids are going through.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL CHANGES

Children entering middle school are also entering adolescence. It's a confusing and difficult time for parents as well as teens. One mother commented, "My daughter's raging hormones resulted in wild mood swings. One minute I'm comforter and provider, the next minute, I'm the devil incarnate. Another parent remarked on her son's increased appetite.

ADJUSTMENTS TO THE NEW FACILITY AND WORK LOAD EXPECTATIONS

Many children attended their elementary school for five or six years and felt safe and secure in managing their days. Middle school students are changing classes for the first time and need to deal with lockers, schedules, and several teachers with different styles and expectations. In high school, students are

help! my child is changing schools

by kerri riggs, m.a., lpc

reminded that their grades are recorded for their transcripts and the homework and projects increase.

POPULARITY AND PEER INFLUENCE

In both high school and middle school, finding new peer groups and an active social life may seem more important than academic accomplishments. Finding the place where they fit in seems critical. Recall your own school experiences, but don't assume your teen has the same issues. Help them to understand they can be successful academically and socially while still discovering and developing their other interests and aptitudes.

HOW PARENTS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Consider other major adjustments your child has made through the years, such as moving, a new sibling, or changing caregivers. How did they react? Complaints of physical symptoms such as stomach or headache? Emotional outbursts (tearfulness or anger)? Some children more naturally adapt to new environments and expectations than others. In older students, you may see forgetfulness, difficulty making decisions, frustration, hopelessness or increased irritability. Changes in eating and sleeping patterns are common. If symptoms persist daily for more than two to three weeks, you might





wish to talk with the school counselor or a therapist who has experience with adolescents.

What eases the transition? One middle school girl keeps a photo of her pet on a key chain

on her backpack. There may be a

special ritual between parent & child at drop-off or pickup. Consistent routines are reassuring.

Assist them with developing their own time management and organization skills. It takes some trial and error, because different organizational styles are equally effective. Encourage teens to break complex projects and research into smaller tasks. Don't assume your child knows how to study or take notes. The handholding they were used to in elementary school will disappear. Provide the structure of a designated place and time to do homework. Learn to be available and helpful without hovering or doing the work for them.

Remember, they will make mistakes. It takes experience to learn to manage conflict with teachers, differences with peers, prioritizing, and study skills. Allow the student to experience

the natural and logical consequences of his actions. Better a tardy or failing grade on a test now, with you there as a safety net, than later. However, repeated failure to learn from those mistakes needs further evaluation.

Keep the lines of communication open. Specific questions such as, "What are you most worried about? How can I help?" let kids know you are interested. Continue to get to know their friends and the friends' parents. If you have not had conversations about risky behaviors like bullying, sexual activity, alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, now is the time to begin. Internet and library resources are available.

Even our adult lives are full of transitions. Assisting your children in managing these school changes will give them the tools they need to adjust to changes in the future.

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