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Ask the Experts

Eliminating School Stress

Q (Middle School): My son just started middle school and he has been having difficulties with the transition, especially the increased workload. This stress from school seems to be negatively affecting his social life as well as the way he behaves at home. How can I help him gain the confidence to get through this time?

A: The transition to middle school may be a shock to many students. Elementary school kids are often spoon-fed what to do, while middle school 'tweens and teens are expected to be independent with much less input.

Appreciating how your son feels can make a real impact. If he knows you're on his team, he'll likely be willing to try new ways of coping.

Get set for the rest of the year: You can use his disappointment with the school year to prepare and motivate him for future success. Listen to how he feels about the workload and his achievement so far. Let him know you understand by repeating back what he's told you – using his words or your own. Your empathy will go a long way. Ask what he likes about how he's handling the transition and is doing in his classes. For example, how he studied for his last history test and how he'd like to do next time. Brainstorm and fine-tune what he needs to do better. Together, set a goal, write it down, and ask what help he needs from you to achieve it.

Helping your son to get a handle on what is overwhelming him is an important next step.

Reduce pressure with preparation: Preparation relieves worry. Get a poster-sized calendar, help him break down assignments into smaller bits, and develop a plan. A book report due next month can be divided like this: Read 10 pages a day (for a 150-page book), use five days to take notes, five to write the draft, then five more to polish. Have your son imagine finishing with days to spare. He can color code the calendar by subject (Science: green; English: yellow) or type of assignment (tests: red; homework: blue).

Your son might also need support separating out what's important to him socially and activities-wise as he navigates this transition.

Reduce pressure some more: Figure out together how to reduce his work and social load. Maybe this isn't the time to take on guitar, with all the practice it requires, or perhaps two sports teams is too much. By preserving the activities he loves and letting go of extra commitments, you free up his time and energy for calmer study and better performance all around.

To boost his confidence, help him tap into the power of his imagination.

Use intention and visualization to turn the tide: Let your son's desire to do well shift his present situation. Suggest he think about being confident – ask what his life will be like when he is confident about handling middle school. Have him close his eyes and sense where confidence lives in his body and what color it is. See how far he can expand this confident feeling by using his intention and his breath. He can imagine breathing in the color of confidence and notice how far it expands through his body. Encourage him to visualize doing well academically and in sports – just like the Olympic athletes do. He can even imagine having a conversation and asking for advice from his older-wiser high-school self who has already been successful. Practice for five minutes, two to three times a day and notice the difference over a month's time. –Dr. Charlotte Reznick



Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D. is the author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success.*
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