

The Race Is On: Use This Summer to Get Your Middle-Schooler Up To Speed

Is your daughter ready for the social aspects of middle school? Use this summer to prepare her – and yourself – for what’s ahead.

“It’s a little like a horse race,” said Dr. Jim Longhurst, psychologist for children and family services organization Starr Commonwealth. “The maneuvering, the jockeying for position -- this is how middle school can seem to a young girl beginning her middle school experience with peer groups.”

According to Longhurst, girls at this stage ask themselves all kinds of questions. “They’re wondering ‘Who will I hang out with?’ ‘Who will be my friends?’ ‘Who will like me?’ ‘What do I do if someone makes fun of me and makes me look stupid?’ ‘How can I fit in here?’”

Parents can help prepare a girl for the transition to middle school by using the summer to talk through some of these issues, Longhurst said. And be sure to listen to learn and understand. When your daughter senses your sensitivity and empathy instead of you finding fault with her, she is much more willing to be open with you, both expressively (talking), and reflectively (listening).

Longhurst offers these suggestions for parents:

- Help your daughter understand that she may be confronted with situations she may not have experienced in elementary school. She may see a lack of respect for others shown by others. Let her know to not be discouraged by this – that in fact there are many of her peers who do want to be respectful and show care for others but are afraid to do so because it might not be the “popular” thing to do. Help her understand that her courage to help others has a positive influence on others and in fact can encourage them to do the same.
- Read up on something called “relational aggression” among girls, especially in middle school where there is so much jockeying for peer group acceptance. Help your daughter understand the difference between playful teasing and the hurtful effects of these other behaviors.
- Help your daughter understand the social hierarchy of girls’ groups, especially in those that seem to ‘rule the roost’ in the school. There are several excellent resources on this topic, including “Queen Bees and Wannabes” by Rosalind Wiseman, and “Odd Girl Out” by Rachel Simmons. Discussing relational aggression from these perspectives can help her understand these dynamics more objectively and not take these experiences so personally.

- Try to be honest with yourself and answer this question: Are you helping your daughter in her best interests, or are you trying to relive your own experiences?
- Don't over react. Your daughter will inevitably have squabbles with friends. Allies become enemies and can turn back into allies the next day. Sometimes their stories will make us upset and angry. Resist the urge to escalate the situation and "make it right." Give your daughter some useful coping skills and help her keep these in a healthy perspective.
- Don't forget all the other stuff that makes for a successful school experience for your new middle school daughter: Help her with and check her homework; help her to be organized; encourage athletic, cultural, and volunteer activities. All these help her to meet a very important developmental task – form a positive concept of who she is.
- Reinforce (all the time) her notion that she is a great person. Middle school is a proving ground for her values. We know how important it is for her to fit in, but as the saying goes – "when in doubt, praise."
- Likewise, don't blame the peer group. Peer groups can be helpful or hurtful. Get to know her friends. Invite them over to your home.

Founded in 1913, Starr Commonwealth is an internationally recognized private, non-profit organization. It serves children and families from locations in Albion, Battle Creek and Detroit, Michigan, and Van Wert and Columbus, Ohio. Services range from foster care to residential treatment and in-home counseling programs that help young adults learn to live independently. Starr also offers No Disposable Kids, a multi-faceted training program that helps schools identify their strengths, analyze their weaknesses and utilize practical, prevention-oriented tools for creating safe and productive school environments.

For more information about Starr Commonwealth programs, including Montcalm School for Boys in Michigan or Montcalm School for Girls in Ohio, call 800-837-5591 or visit starr.org.