For many kids, the transition to middle school is overwhelming. Middle school age children experience many physical and emotional changes during this period of their life, all of which can make them distracted, forgetful, anxious, self-conscious, and argumentative.

By staying involved in your child’s life, you can anticipate difficulties and be better equipped to help him roll with the punches. Here are three common challenges middle school children face, plus ways you can help your child meet them:

1. **She has a different teacher for each subject.** Instead of the supportive setting of elementary school where she had just one teacher who challenged her strengths and understood her weaknesses, she now has several teachers, each with his or her own teaching style and expectations.

   **What you can do now:**
   - **Building tours in the spring and summer.** Take advantage of that time to visit with your child so she can meet some of the teachers, hear how the day is structured, and learn the layout of the school so that she at least knows how to find her locker, classrooms, and the cafeteria.
   - **Meet your child’s counselor.** Many middle schools assign an advisor, or counselor, to every student (or one for the entire grade). That person, who should be steeped in the developmental needs of early adolescence, acts as mentor, troubleshooter, and advocate.

2. **Friendships shift.** At the same time that your child is going through puberty and wrestling with changes in his body and swirling moods, he’s trying to figure out who’s in, who’s out, and where he stands on the social ladder. If he’s attending a new school, he may be sharing a lunch table with youngsters from one or more elementary schools — kids he may not know and who don’t know him.

   **What you can do now:**
   - **Help your child manage his stress** by making sure he eats right, exercises regularly, and gets enough sleep. Show him how deep breathing, visualization, or yoga can help him relax.
   - **Remain approachable.** Encourage your child to open up about what’s going on in school — but don’t interrogate, and give advice only when asked. Your goal is to keep her talking so she realizes she can count on you.
   - **Bolster social skills.** If your child says she has no friends, help her find new ways to get to know classmates better. Replace “No one likes me” with “I’ll be a better listener” or “I’ll invite someone to the basketball game this weekend.” Some children miss social cues and could benefit from professional counseling to become more aware of the way their words and behavior affect others.

3. **He’s down on himself.** Perhaps he’s distracted, irritable, and doesn’t even try — and his grades show it. Perhaps he’s confused by the subject matter or, on the other hand, not challenged enough. Or perhaps he’s stuck in a rut of low self-esteem.

   **What you can do now:**
   - **Don’t overreact.** Remind yourself that your child’s behavior is not unusual. Empathize with her frustrations (remind her of some of your own school difficulties). Of course, chronic lateness or forgetfulness or consistently low grades may also be a sign of a deeper learning or motivational issue. If your child continues to struggle, schedule a conference with the teacher so you can figure out what steps to take.
   - **Help silence his inner critic — the little voice that tells him he’s a loser.** The child who doesn’t feel good about himself will have a hard time doing well academically. To oust negative thoughts that keep him stuck, role-play how to substitute positive messages. If he says, “I can’t do anything right,” suggest that he say to himself: “Mistakes are a chance to learn. I’ll ask the teacher for help and do my best.”
   - **Maintain family traditions and rituals — especially family dinners.** Your tween may sit silently, but these little events will add to her sense of security and remind her of how much she is loved. Middle school age children take a lot of hard knocks and need to know their parents are on their side when they get home. That alone can help keep your child on course.