

**Tips for Mentors:
Preparing Mentees for Middle School**

Students entering middle school often experience a variety of fears, from how to find their classrooms to worrying about bullies. Here are some strategies for helping your mentee work through those fears.

Give your mentee opportunities to express his feelings about middle school.

If your mentee isn't bringing up the topic but you notice that he is more distracted or stressed out than usual, initiate a conversation. Acknowledge the change that is coming and ask open-ended questions to see if anything is worrying him.

Don't minimize his fears and concerns.

It's tempting to try to downplay them or respond with a blanket statement like "You'll be fine." Sometimes just listening and empathizing is enough. Listen to what he has to say and offer practical suggestions if it appears he wants your advice.

Help your mentee overcome fears of the unknown.

If she's worried about opening a combination lock, bring one for her to practice on. If getting between classes sounds impossible, get a stopwatch and create a course so she can see how long it takes to get from one place to another. If homework sounds scary, ask her teacher or counselor to provide some guidance. Make sure she knows where the bus stop is.

Talk about your own transitions, during middle school or any time in your life.

Strategic self-disclosure may be a useful tool to help your mentee see that his worries are normal and expected. You may even get a laugh or two as you describe your own experiences and how you handled them.

Help your mentee get organized.

Middle school means more homework and a greater need to stay organized to keep up with assignments from multiple teachers. You can relieve your mentee's worries about schoolwork by helping him develop his organizational skills. Look at how his work is currently organized and offer tips for improvements, and talk about how he can organize his free time to get homework done.

Help your mentee set goals for getting involved in new things.

Look at elective class offerings together and check out extracurricular activities. Talk about how an after-school activity can help her make new friends, and how elective classes allow her to follow her own interests with students who share them.

Point out your mentee's strengths and abilities.

Early adolescence is a time of plummeting self-esteem and self-confidence. Find ways to remind your mentee about her abilities and how they will help her be successful in her new school. Be specific in your praise. For example, "You've really gotten organized with your schoolwork this year. That will help a lot when you start middle school."

Talk about friendships.

Changing schools doesn't have to mean losing friendships. See if your mentee can name some students he wants to get to know better who are going to the new school. Talk about how he has made new friends in the past. Remind him he has friends in other settings, too—in the neighborhood, place of worship, or sports activities. And let him know you will be there for him in the coming year also.

Support your mentee throughout the first year of middle school.

Your mentee's worries won't disappear when she enters the middle school for the first time. Adjusting to the new school and finding her place there will take time, and she is bound to feel discouraged at times. As she comes to you with problems and concerns, listen and use open questions to help her problem-solve on her own. You can't fix her problems for her, but you can offer your own perspectives.

Seek out help for your mentee if problems persist.

Mentors sometimes see academic struggles, changes in behavior, or signs of emotional stress before teachers and other school staff. If you believe your mentee needs additional help, alert your program coordinator. Middle schools usually have more resources than elementary schools to help students through a difficult period. Your role is to help your mentee and his family learn about these resources and encourage your mentee to access them when needed.