

THE BIG LEAP to kindergarten (or middle school)

What teachers expect your kids to know

BY VANESSA DRUCKMAN

As storefronts fill with back-to-school signs and stacks of colorful notebooks, kids begin dreading the loss of the freedom of summer. But often, it is the parents who are filled with the most anxiety. This is especially true when kids are beginning elementary or middle school, and parents aren't sure how best to help their kids make the transition.

This fall, Laura Epstein, a mother of four in Maplewood, will be sending her oldest off to kindergarten. Although he is excited, she is filled with questions that keep her up at night. "Will he find his classroom once he gets there? Will he get on the right bus home? Will he be feeling scared and alone? It is hard to give up the control and oversight you're used to having, and just trust everything will be OK," she says. It's also hard to know what it is teachers and school administrators expect of children this age.

That first day of kindergarten can often be harder for the parents than for the children. Sending your little one off on the bus to big-kid school, where they'll cross fifth graders in the hallways, can be terrifying. What's more, as more schools are beginning to mandate full-day kindergarten programs, children may go from half-day preschool classes to a grueling all-day schedule.

To ease parental anxiety and your young student's fears, it's best to break down the skills needed in kindergarten into three distinct categories: social, reading and math, and address them one by one.

BASIC SKILLS

Although kindergarten has become more academic in the last decade, social skills are still the most important to instill in your child. As Director of Education of the Goddard Schools, a nationwide network of preschools, Sue Adair spends a great deal of time preparing children for kindergarten. She encourages parents to foster independence in their children by teaching them to go to the bathroom alone, to snap their clothes and be able to follow two- or three-step directions. A kindergartner will have to be able to sit through 30- or even 45-minute lessons, so spending time this month doing quiet crafts and activities will help ready them. Fostering your child's gross motor skills by playing catch and spending time on the monkey bars is also an important way to boost your child's playground readiness and increase his social confidence.

Children beginning kindergarten should have pre-reading and pre-literacy skills. They should be able to count to 10, know their colors and shapes, and have some knowledge of letters and sounds. During the summer months, the last thing children want to do is to sit inside doing drills, but there are many ways to develop your child's academic skills as you're out and about. Dr. Mary Mokris is an education specialist for Kumon Learning Centers. She encourages parents to begin looking at the world around them as a vibrant classroom.

GETTING READY

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE KINDERGARTEN READINESS:

1. Play catch.
2. Hunt for letters in your favorite picture book.
3. Count the red cars on the road.
4. Make up a fruit graph with banana and apple stickers.

PREPARATION FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL:

1. Buy decorations for their locker.
2. Decide whether to purchase a cell phone and family cell phone rules.
3. Have you discussed bullying?
4. Have you discussed the dangers of technology?

RESOURCES

BOOKS FOR PARENTS OF KINDERGARTNERS:

The Giant Encyclopedia of Transition Activities for Children aged 3 to 6
by Kathy Charner, Maureen Murphy
and Jennifer Ford

Is Everybody Ready for Kindergarten?
A Toolkit for Preparing Children and
their Families by Angele Sancho Passe

FOR NEW MIDDLE-SCHOOLERS:

A Smart Girl's Guide to Starting Middle School: Everything you Need to Know about Juggling More Homework, More Teachers, and More Friends (an American Girl title)
by Julie Williams

Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook: The Middle School
by Robin Epstein and Ben H. Winters

Middle School is Worse than Meatloaf: a Year Told Through Stuff
by Jennifer L. Holm

The most basic activity to boost children's math skills is to count everything: from peas on the plate to the steps between rooms. Kids can be introduced to charting by putting the stickers from fruit on a chart on the fridge. Geometry can be reinforced by finding shapes in the everyday world, and number skills can be strengthened by spotting numbers on license plates and at the grocery store. As for reading readiness, simply reading to kids is incredibly valuable, but the activity can be enriched by pausing to hunt for letters and sight words. Kids can also be shown the value of reading by having them read the words on cereal boxes and on store signs.

BIG KIDS

Kids may seem older and less vulnerable by the time they make the move from elementary school to middle school, but the transition can still be a time of anxiety for parents and children alike. Tammy McCarthy, a mother of two in Ridgewood, will be sending her son off to middle school this September. Although she feels her son is ready for the new independence, she still has fears. "The only thing that makes me nervous is the whole social scene. I know that's when drugs and alcohol and even sex begin, and I'm going to have to address that."

The most important skill to instill in children who are entering middle school is organization. To successfully make the transition from having one teacher to multiple classrooms and an individualized schedule, children need to be independent and responsible. Parents can help kids get organized when purchasing supplies, but the onus should really be placed on the children themselves, as they will be the ones navigating the hallways and organizing their lockers. To begin empowering your child to be responsible for his own time management, have him create a schedule spreadsheet on the computer. Middle school is also an important time to address the dangers of technology. Even if your child doesn't have a cell phone yet, she could still be affected by

sexting, and should still know your stance and the school's policy on using phones in class.

As a school psychiatrist, Dr. Tiffany Sanders can attest to the increased social pressures in middle school. Many of her patients are victims of bullying and competition. She suggests role-playing typical social situations with your child over the summer to get them ready for middle school. To prepare them for what to do on the first day at lunch if their friends are not in the same lunch period, give your child some conversation starters when approaching a table of unknown kids. "Hey, aren't you in one of my classes? I'm new, do you mind if I sit with you today?" Dr. Sanders also suggests discussing how to handle it if someone makes fun of their clothes or appearance. The best strategy is to ignore the bully and change the subject, while maintaining their cool to catch the bully off guard. If the teasing becomes overwhelming and is hard to ignore, then an adult should be alerted. Teach your child that the school psychiatrist or social worker are safe adults in the middle school environment.

Whether your child will be entering kindergarten or middle school this fall, taking them on a tour of their new school is a great idea. Simply walking the halls, seeing the classrooms and the cafeteria, and running on the playground can alleviate most of your child's fears and questions. Once they can visualize their new environment, they can begin preparing themselves for the great transition and the exciting experiences that the next year will hold. The hardest part of that first day of school will then be back on you, the parent, to keep your tears and emotions hidden from your child until they walk out of sight and into their new school.