

from activity to activity, overly hectic schedules can strain otherwise healthy marriages. "If you only ever see your partner in the evening after the children are in bed," says Honore, "that's another sign of over-scheduling."

Experts also remind us that electronic media have crept into our children's lives in ways that crowd out unstructured downtime. "I would just say shut it all off," advises Ulmer, "because kids need time to talk. They need time to think. They need time to read. They need time to stare at walls, and if they're constantly doing something, with media or activities, they don't have that recharge time for their brain."

The Middle Ages (ages 11 to 14)

Managing Middle School

No matter how old our children get, when they're stressed, we're stressed. What makes the middle school years unique is the necessity for parents to transition from playing a lead role in minimizing our children's stress to allowing them the independence to manage stress on their own. Still, there's plenty we can do to guide them.


Like any major life change, adjusting to middle school will be less stressful if kids feel familiar with the environment. That's why many middle schools offer opportunities for students to visit during their last year of elementary school. At Binnmead Middle School in southeast Portland, that visit includes not only sitting in on classes but also eating lunch. "Even lunch is different," says Nancy Mancy, a counselor at Binnsmead. "You have more choices. The way you punch in your number is different." Visiting the school before becoming a student gives kids a leg up on all these little differences. If a school doesn't schedule formal visits or tours, says Mancy, call and request one. Attending a summer program at the middle school can "give kids a bigger comfort zone, too," she adds.

Once the school year begins, many students find they're unprepared to handle the multiple homework assignments and special projects required in middle school. "It's not one teacher giving you homework," says Kristin VanOchten, a middle school reading teacher in the David Douglas School District. "You might have three tests on the same day. You might have two projects due on the same day. That's a big source of stress."

To help with organization and time management, most middle schools provide students with planners – if your child's school doesn't provide a planner, buy one! – but most kids need some guidance in order to use the planner effectively. Your child's teacher will likely remind him to enter due dates into his planner, but that's only one step in the process. You can help your child to think through the steps required to complete each assignment, then show him how to write each step on an appropriate day in his planner.

Begin with the due date and work backward, says **Anne Blumer**, a professional organizer who often helps students with time management. Estimate the time it will take to complete each step, and remember to include some room for unanticipated interruptions. Have your child check off each assignment in his planner when it's complete, says Blumer, and highlight the assignment when it's submitted. At the end of the week, look through the planner with your child and address any items that aren't highlighted.

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AGES & STAGES

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In addition to a well-used planner, Blumer recommends purchasing a binder with a pocketed divider for each subject. Label the front pocket of each divider "Homework to Turn In" and the back pocket "Homework to Complete." That way, completed homework won't get lost in the pile of new assignments. Allow some time for your child to learn the new system, checking in regularly until you're both confident it's working. If concerns arise, don't hesitate to email your child's teacher(s) or check in with the school counselor. The counselor can coordinate meetings and/or facilitate communication to include all your child's teachers.

While you can help your child manage scheduling for homework and special projects, there's not a lot you can do when it comes to navigating his course from class to class. With different materials required for each class and substantial distances to travel between classes, many students have difficulty simply getting to class properly equipped and on time. That's another area where the school counselor can help, says Mancy. She often strategizes with parents and students about getting from class to class with the proper materials in hand. You can't (make that shouldn't!) be in the hall to help your child get to class, but you can help him determine how to organize his materials within his locker and plot the most direct course from class to class.

Speaking of being in the halls, you'll find fewer parents in the halls of most middle schools than elementary schools, but there are plenty of opportunities to volunteer in middle school and it's important that we take advantage of them. "You don't have to volunteer in your kid's class," says Mancy, although some teachers do appreciate the help. "It really helps just to be around. It helps the parent understand the middle school system and the kids feel more secure. Whether it's their mom who's helping in the office or the library or their friend's mom, it gives them a little more grounding and establishes easier communication between teachers and parents."

With the range of ages and maturity levels in middle schools, keeping a close parental eye without being overbearing is essential. Talk with your kids every day about their experiences in school, and consider where they are and what they're doing after school. While it's legally acceptable for 11-year-olds to be home alone, it's not always the safest choice. Find out what afterschool activities are available through or near the school, including homework support and tutoring.

"It's about striking that balance," says VanOchten, "which is challenging, between letting them take responsibility yet still being involved."

Emily Puro is a Portland freelance writer and mom.

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- Mary Ellen Ulmer, pediatrician



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