

Middle School Just Got a Lot Harder

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Today

Tweens on the cusp of adolescence straddle two worlds. Hormones and friendship dramas are adult problems that can sometimes make them behave like toddlers. It's a time of confusion and change — and two years of pandemic restrictions and lockdowns have made it even messier. But there are ways to help.

– with reporting by *Fiona Tapp* from *Ottawa, Canada* 

An age to remember



1 |

Brushing up on basic skills

Many kids who are entering middle school this year have missed out on some of the fundamental learning opportunities of elementary school. “We have had to reteach basic core skills, basic reading skills, basic math skills, basic social skills,” explains Arica Brown, a special education teacher with over a decade of elementary school experience. “Kids are having to relearn how to be a student in a classroom.”

Brown says it was difficult to make online learning truly equitable for all students, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The way forward, she says, is for teachers and administrators to practice patience and to work on rebuilding the foundations of learning.

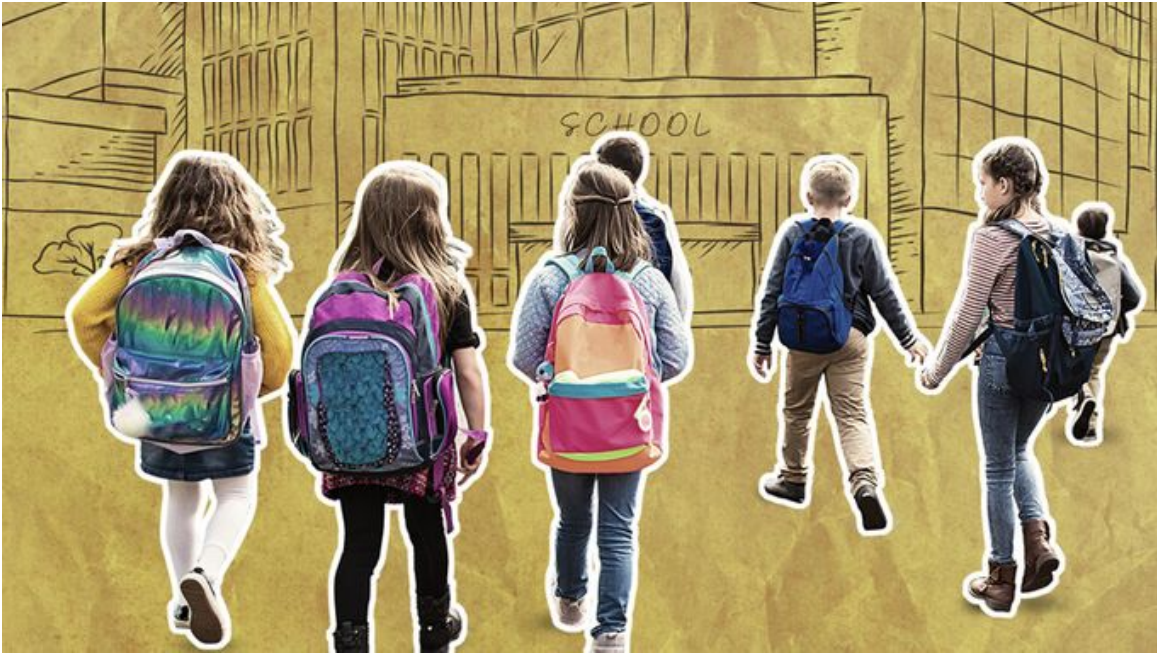
“We have to be gracious with these kids who haven't been able to see each other in years. We have to build time into the day for them to have conversations and engage in play.”

Kathryn Starke, a reading specialist and teacher for over 17 years, told OZY that one of the major issues with remote learning for middle school kids was that they were considered mature enough to be trusted to complete independent tasks. However, unless they were very motivated learners, they still needed direction and supervision from a teacher. They simply may not have had the context to comprehend assignments without support.

“Background knowledge is so huge in the upper grades. You're not going to fully comprehend something without prior life experience,” she said.

This month, many kids are advancing to a new grade whether they're ready or not, and the challenge of responding to this situation will fall largely on teachers. “You can't retain 150 children. So, children are being moved on to the next grade perhaps before they're ready. Fourth, fifth and sixth grade teachers really just have to mentally prepare themselves.”

Back in the saddle



1 |

Dusting off friendships

Dr. Sanam Hafeez, a neuropsychologist and professor at Columbia University, says that children in upper elementary and middle school grades may find it difficult to re-establish lost friendships when returning to school after lockdowns. “It was a challenge to reconnect with peers, especially for the younger students, who had a harder time staying in contact with their friends. Those who felt the need to take more safety precautions may have felt embarrassed by friends who didn’t share their beliefs, and that is where peer pressure comes into play.” These differences may have been highlighted if schools reverted to policies of personal choice. For example, Hafeez says, if mask mandates were relaxed, a parent may have encouraged their child to keep their mask on, but the child may have felt pressure from their friends to remove it.

Puberty may have intensified some of these challenges, bringing physical development that usually happens so gradually that kids don’t notice drastic transformations in their peer group. The dynamics of timing changed during the pandemic, when kids were apart for long periods of time and then suddenly reunited.

“Middle school kids mature at different rates, but they observed those changes all at once,” says psychologist Dr. Sharon Witkin. “One of the hardest things socially for kids was that they didn’t get to watch their friends’ maturational change. And if there was no longer a good match, it was so startling when they came back to school, and their best friend was suddenly through puberty and looked like a whole different kid — and they still hadn’t even approached that stage, and felt very lost in the dust.”

2 |

Dis/organized

Virtual learning was a more relaxed and casual environment than school. Kids were in their own homes, surrounded by distractions and — not unlike their parents — may have stayed in their pajamas all day and gotten accustomed to unscheduled breaks and constant snacking.

“Kids didn’t get to practice their organizational skills or worry about whether their homework was in their backpack. So they’ve lost a year of cementing those sorts of skills,” said Dr. Witkin.

How to make up for lost time?

How adults can help now



1 |

Use these last days of summer

In the lead-up to the first day of school, parents can help their kids practice key skills. “Look for opportunities to keep your child's mind engaged,” said Arica Brown. “If there's a community project or public library, there are often free events going on to keep their wheels of curiosity turning.”

Brown also suggests that parents follow their kid’s school on social media as they may share notices, resources and ideas to help foster a renewed sense of school community. This might help alleviate anxiety in kids who could feel disconnected from their teachers and classmates.

2 |

Be patient

Dr. Hafeez says parents can support their middle schoolers by being patient and aware that this transition will take time. “Parents should sit down with their children and talk about how the pandemic affected everyone.” Dr. Hafeez suggested letting kids know that it’s normal to be anxious, nervous, stressed and even confused about the post-pandemic world. “It’s important to let them maintain their routines and help them adjust as the world adapts.”

3 |

Foster independence

Help kids flex their organizational skills and regain their autonomy by assigning household chores, and then holding them to those responsibilities. Encourage kids to reestablish routines by practicing getting their school supplies, backpack, lunch and books ready for school, to prevent morning meltdowns once school resumes.

Reading serves kids academically and can also help them navigate friendship problems or social issues that may have arisen during the pandemic. These are our top picks for readers between the ages of 8 and 12:

- [“Emmy in the Key of Code”](#) by [Aimee Lucido](#)
- [“Nowhere Boy”](#) by [Katherine Marsh](#)
- [“The Only Black Girls in Town”](#) by [Brandy Colbert](#)
- [“Hello, Universe”](#) by [Erin Entrada Kelly](#)

Community Corner



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