

Map Your Middle School!

Parents, your new sixth grader may look huge to you—it's been a long time since preschool, after all—but sixth grade is the “kindergarten” of the next seven years of schooling, and your kid can use any help you can give.

This year, if your school system is like most in this country, your child will be facing some big changes: a larger school, many different classrooms, new friends, and lots and lots of chances to get lost—all at the very point in life when being “cool” and “knowing it all” is more important than ever.

Here's a surprisingly simple back to school project that will bring big payoffs all year. Help your middle schooler make a practical “map” of her middle school day.



What You Need:

- Map of your school campus, approximately 8-1/2"x11" (check your school's website or printed handbook)
- Assorted felt-tip pens in several colors
- Transparency Pen (one used for overhead projectors and can be washed off of a plastic surface)
- Laminator (local copy or office supply stores usually offer this service)
- Copy of your child's class schedule, as soon as it is available!

What You Do:

1. Help your child download a copy of your school campus map, showing all the buildings and—if possible—the locations of all the key classrooms, athletic fields, and cafeteria spaces your child will use regularly.
2. Check your copy and make sure that all of the labels are clear and readable. Note: many school maps tend to leave out areas that, for kids, are crucial. Does your map show lockers and bathrooms, for example? If not, see if you can contact a kid who attends already, and get that information on your map! Or better yet, you and your child can take a visit to the school ahead of time and see for yourself! This is also a great way to make your child familiar with the new space on her own time, before the first day of school, when there is so much more to worry about! It will definitely take some of the edge off.
3. Have your child write the name of the school, as well as the number of the school year (2009-10, for example) in clear letters on top. If your child wishes to add any other decorations—such as school colors, for example, this is also a good time to do it.
4. Laminate the map so that it is securely sealed in plastic on both sides.
5. Now the fun starts. Invite your child to take out his schedule and look it over with you. At the same time, place the school map in front of your child, and give her a transparency pen to use. Working together, read out each item on the schedule, and have your child find where on the map she'll be. Invite her to trace out his daily route, including routes to lockers, bathroom breaks, recess, and cafeteria. He can use different colored pens to differentiate between different times and routes.
6. Don't be surprised to see lines going all over the place—that's part of the learning process for everyone. The many transitions throughout the middle school day are perhaps the biggest challenge for incoming students, and it can be enormously helpful and comforting for all kids to go over these routines ahead of time.
7. When you're done, go ahead and erase your map, and have your child practice “traveling” without the schedule. Does she remember what comes first and last each day? How she'll make it from place to place?

For some kids, this activity may be easy. If that's the case, you can start by celebrating—but don't hesitate to add a little extra challenge as well. See if your kid can use a scale and compass to measure how far he'll walk in a day and then in a week! And while you're at it, consider interviewing a kid your child knows who has already attended the school for a while. Ask some practical clarifications, with your map in hand: when it's time for lunch, for example, where do the sixth graders usually eat? When they go to their lockers, is there a certain route that everyone prefers? Older kids usually love to give advice—and for your incoming sixth grader, you can be sure that in this case knowledge is definitely power!

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