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Transition brings new freedom, challenges

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Middle school brings big changes for tweens. One of the immediate challenges can be learning to master a combination lock. / Getty Images

Written by **Jessica Bliss**
The Tennessean

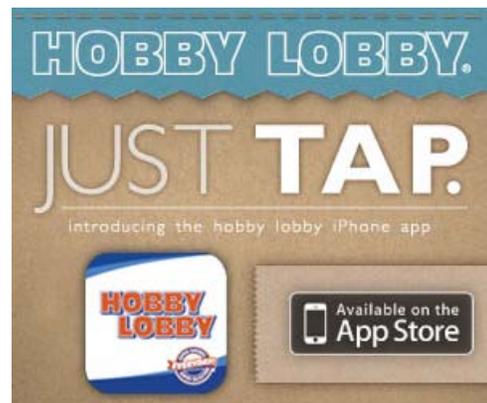
Bhalika Rajan is artsy and instrumental. Her twin brother, Beema, is more into video games and the outdoors.

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But as different as these two siblings are, they are about to face the same challenge — navigating middle school.

Like many soon-to-be sixth-graders, the Rajans are excited to begin a stage in life that feels “more adult,” but with cliques, crushes, acne and pop quizzes, transitioning to the locker-lined hallways can be as testing as it is educational.



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In the next few weeks, as thousands of Middle Tennessee tweens begin a new grade at a new school, parents and students alike will learn what it means to be a middle schooler. They will adapt and adjust — with some strife and, hopefully, much more enjoyment.



Sudha Rajan, second from right, helps her son Beema, 11, try on new clothes as they prepare for the first day of school as father Naga and sister Bhalika look on at their home in Franklin. / Jae S. Lee / The Tennessean

“I do think it will be fun,” said Bhalika Rajan, who will attend Grassland Middle School beginning next week. “There are going to be more challenges, and you get to face those challenges. I find that fascinating.”

Big changes afoot

Sometimes, Bellevue mom Vicki Thompson said, the middle school transition is harder on the parents than the kids.

“You really have to step back,” she said. “And, for a lot of parents, it’s the first time they haven’t sat and helped with homework at night or walked their kids to class every day.”

Thompson has already made the transition once with her now 15-year-old daughter, Piper, but she still feels some anxiety as 9-year-old Paige begins at Bellevue Middle School this week.

While elementary school is so insular, middle school is really the first major step where students learn to deal with responsibility, different people and different things, Thompson said. The kids will address worries like mastering locker combinations, mapping out unfamiliar hallways between classes, dealing with new teachers and a bigger workload.

But perhaps the biggest transition comes in adjusting to new classmates, groups and activities.

“There’s just so many social challenges,” Thompson said.

“... Middle schoolers are crazy. They are just a great big ball of raging hormones, and they don’t know what to do with it. You have to help teach them that some of the things they think are the



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biggest drama in their entire life are not that big. That's hard to teach."

Book offers guidance

In her new novel, "Lucy and CeCee's How to Survive (and Thrive) in Middle School," local teacher Kimberly Dana attempts to impart a few of those lessons with a book for pre-teens that she said is "funny and also authentic and useful."

Dana, an English teacher at Nashville's McMurray Middle School, reveals what happens in the hallowed halls of junior high through the eyes of two radically different characters: CeCee, the shy and studious girl, and Lucy, her impulsive and boy-crazy BFF.

The girls chatter through notes they pass in school, personal diary entries and lists they make — lots and lots of lists about everything from how to handle gossip to homework excuses. Sprinkled throughout is tween-esque lingo like "unhinged" and "mega-ancient."

Dana — who said eighth grade algebra was the "bane of my existence" and, for better or worse, her social life was No. 1 — supplements the book with her own observations, as well as real stories students have told her over her 18-year teaching career. The result is a lighthearted novel that also tackles serious issues, such as cyber bullying, boyfriends, eating disorders and self-esteem.

"These kids are evolving," Dana said. "They are neither child nor adult — they are in the middle. They are growing up socially, academically and mentally, and it's a very confusing time.

"This book is a 'big hug.' It says, 'It's going to be tough, but you can do it.'"

Sweet freedom

Eleven-year-old Logan Eggleston does have a few worries about entering Brentwood Middle School — "more classwork, more homework and more tests," for example. She also is not looking forward to going from being the oldest in the school as a fifth-grader to the bottom of the ranks again in middle school.

"Now we're right back to being the younger ones," she said.

But, she is eager to see her friends and start a new school.

"I feel older, because I get a locker now," she said.

Her mom, Lori, also is excited. Logan has made lots of connections with future classmates through the sports she is involved in, Lori Eggleston said, and Lori feels good about her daughter's organizational skills and ability to prioritize.

The biggest learning curve for Logan may be the autonomy she is given.

“They just grow so much,” said Lori, who is a guidance counselor at Brentwood High School. “Logan may be really surprised at the level of freedoms that they have in middle school.”

Bhalika and Beema Rajan are already looking forward to that. No more cubbies, no more coloring books, no more walking in lines. Instead, there are new friends and new activities — like band for Bhalika, who is excited to play the flute, and sports for Beema, who is interested in playing [football](#).

Plus, Beema said, even though they may lose recess, gym is a lot more fun in middle school, according to his friends.

“I feel good stepping up a grade,” Beema said. “Even though it seems different, it will be something I like.”

And, Bhalika said, if there are any issues, well, having a twin around won't hurt.

“It's always good to have a brother around to help you out,” she said.

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