

Tips From Your School Psychologist

Transitioning From Elementary to Middle School

Transitioning to a new school can be an exciting but stressful time for children. Even when the change is positively anticipated, such as “graduating” to the next school level, facing the unknown can cause anxiety. The transition from elementary to middle school can be particularly unsettling. The environment tends to be larger, potentially less nurturing, more departmentalized, more competitive, and more demanding academically. Additionally, students are expected to be more independent academically and their social life often becomes more complex and intense.

Understandably parents can feel concerned about how their child will adjust to these changes. Luckily, there are many ways for parents to help smooth the transition and support their child’s academic and social success in their new school environment.

What are some common concerns of those transitioning to middle school?

- ***A New Environment:*** Finding lockers, lunchrooms and bathrooms, getting through crowded hallways, getting to class on time, getting on the right bus to go home, lack of experience in dealing with extracurricular activities
- ***A Different Type of Workload:*** Keeping up with materials, new grading standards and procedures, more long term assignments, lack of basic academic skills
- ***New Social Expectations:*** Handling increased peer pressures (e.g., cliques, dealing with older students, and meeting students from other schools), social immaturity
- ***A Different Schedule:*** Remembering which class to go to next, becoming familiar with more teachers, no recess, limited free time
- ***Other:*** Reduced parent involvement, accepting more responsibility for their own actions, unrealistic parental expectations, coping with adolescent physical development

What can parents do to ease the transition?

- ***Emphasize positive aspects of middle school.*** With the move will come more opportunities for individuality and freedom. Students will have increasing choice in elective courses and extracurricular activities. There will be more opportunities to find friends with common interests.
- ***Teach study skills.*** Help your child begin to self-regulate by breaking down large tasks into manageable pieces and providing (or asking the teacher to provide) guidelines so students can monitor their own progress. Help familiarize your child with using an agenda/assignment book to keep track of daily and long-term assignments.
- ***Schedule tours of new school.*** During the summer prior to entering the school, parents should arrange for a

tour of the building with your child. Request your child's schedule early and "walk their schedule" to determine best routes between classes.

- **Attend orientation with your child.** Often schools have older students available at these sessions to speak about the transition and provide tips for navigating the school environment.
- **Encourage participation.** Whether in extracurricular activities, extra-help homework programs, or school social/sports activities, encourage your child to seek these out as an opportunity to meet new people and become an active part of the school community.
- **Continue or increase your involvement.** Middle schools continue to have numerous opportunities available for parent involvement. Parents should maintain communication with the school. Share your concerns immediately with school staff and read all communications sent home.
- **Get to know other parents and students.** Help organize or encourage the school to organize a "getting-to-know-you" event early in the school year. One example would be to have the students participate in a service activity such as picking up trash around the school and raising money through a car wash.
- **Seek out assistance.** Should your child have special concerns with transitions, seek out the assistance of school professionals, such as the school psychologist or counselor, early in the school year.

Family support and parental supervision are critical in making the transition to middle school a smooth one. Research has shown that students whose parents provide a supportive, moderate level of supervision, along with some freedom and autonomy, achieve higher grades and achievement test scores. With your help, your child can be assured a successful entrance into the middle school years.

Resources

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition. Phone: 612-624-2097; e-mail: ncset@umn.edu; web: <http://www.ncset.org/>

Adapted from "Transition from Elementary to Middle School: Strategies for Educators," by Valerie Niesen and Paula Sachs-Wise, http://www.nasponline.org/communications/spawareness/transition_lem2mid.pdf