



Middle School Transition: It's Harder Than You Think

Making the Transition to Middle School Successful

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There are a number of transitions in adolescence, each representing a "rite of passage." Many of these transitions are spiritual or faith-based in nature, such as the bar or bat mitzvah and confirmation. One that does not get the attention it deserves is the transition from elementary to middle school. Depending on the community, this usually occurs between the fourth and seventh grade. Regardless of when it occurs, the transition to middle school tends to destabilize many students, requiring them to re-establish a sense of their identity in a more mature and demanding environment.

It is a transition that often signals increased referrals to mental health services; the failure of previously successful methods for academic success to match up with more rigorous workloads; the start of smoking, alcohol, drug, violence, and attendance problems; and damage to self-esteem—especially for girls.

It is against this backdrop that virtually every adolescent looks for answers on how to develop a new and positive identity. Because much of adolescent behavior revolves around that search, middle school educators must take time to understand and help students find those answers while guiding them toward opportunities, relationships, and skills that allow them to develop a strong sense of self. By taking a student's-eye view of the transition to middle school, educators can get a better idea of the kinds of support that can strengthen the new middle schoolers during this difficult time, and avoid or minimize a number of problems.

Trials and Tribulations

The first problem faced by most new middle school students is simply finding their way around a strange building. One of their greatest fears is getting lost, followed by difficulties in finding and opening lockers, and bringing the right materials to the right class at the right time. They must also cope with traveling longer distances to school, eating in a larger cafeteria, and changing clothes in a crowded locker room. While most of them survive these ordeals, as many as 25 percent don't. When any of these difficulties persist for more than a month or two, some form of intervention may be needed.

Just walking around in a new school can also produce challenges. These include being bullied or harassed by older students, having things stolen, having conflicts with teachers, and being disciplined. All of these can be highly traumatic events, especially for students who are having a difficult time establishing a new sense of identity.

Another problem for the new student is finding and connecting with a peer group, a task complicated by having to make new friends and emerging feelings about members of the opposite sex. Coping skills are important in meeting these social needs. For a relatively small number of students, difficulties in establishing positive peer connections may result in their having a hard time resisting pressure to smoke, drink alcohol, or take drugs.

In the middle school classroom, students must adapt to new ways of preparation and learning. Unfortunately, the social aspects of their identity are often more important to them than academic success. This may explain why it is not uncommon to see students "play dumb," trading off success in the classroom for peer approval. However, many students are simply not well prepared for the academic demands of middle school. They need

explicit instruction, coaching, and support with regard to organizing time and resources for homework; responding to work that is more challenging and requires more effort; understanding and addressing the varying expectations of teachers in different subject areas; and accomplishing such basic tasks as studying, taking notes, and taking tests.

What Schools Can Do

What adolescents making the transition to middle school need is a combination of skill training and social-emotional learning. They not only need explicit proactive, preventive instruction and support in addressing the stresses of transition, they also need opportunities to grow as people. Middle schools must provide them with experiences that meet essential needs in these four areas:

Contributions. While adolescents may appear to be self-centered, what they are experiencing in their teens is more self-discovery than selfishness. Young people actually thrive on contributing to causes like saving the environment, helping senior citizens, teaching younger kids, working in soup kitchens, and helping in political campaigns.

Belonging. Adolescents seek to join peer groups where they can have a role and a purpose; find positive relationships with others who have similar interests or abilities; and feel safe, comfortable, and accepted. To keep them from forming or joining gangs, middle schools need to provide a variety of structured outlets—especially for those who don't seem able to "fit in."

Talents. Educators may not be aware of adolescents' talents that are not readily visible in the classroom. Those talents might include anything from writing and computers to dancing or simply getting along with people. By helping young adolescents discover and develop their talents, and getting to know them beyond their academic abilities, educators can build positive relationships that can lead to positive growth.

Life Skills. Middle school students need to develop life skills to deal with a wide range of possibilities in and out of school. Educators need to look for opportunities that allow students to learn more about their feelings and those of others; how to set goals and plan for the long and short term; how to work in groups as team players and as leaders; how to be thoughtful problem solvers and decision makers; and how to bounce back from reverses.

In smoothing the transition from elementary to middle school, educators need to provide adolescents with inspiration, imagination, joy, optimism, humor, love, support, firmness, safety, clear values, and—perhaps most important—respect. With our support, the transition can serve as a catalyst for positive growth, starting students on a journey that will see their teen aspirations soar into adult accomplishment.

References

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Ideas to Ease the Transition

Middle school principals have initiated a number of activities to ease the stress of transition and to help build students' skills. Here are a few examples:

- Make sure that each incoming student has an older "buddy" who initiates contact before the beginning of the school year and provides ongoing support.
- Send home to parents of new middle school students materials that describe middle school as a site of opportunities for involvement, and not of potential problems.
- Provide a forum for teaching middle school survival skills, including organization, studying, responding to peer pressure, communication, and research.
- Schedule early and periodic individual and/or group counseling visits for new students so that they don't have to take the initiative in seeking help if they are having problems.

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