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Navigating the Move to Middle School: How Parents Can Help Smooth the Roads

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Most of us remember middle school or junior high school as a time when we felt uncomfortable with ourselves. Often times, it was the patience of the adults in our lives that helped us through all the physical and social changes and challenges. As parents of children entering middle level schools, we hope that our children have positive experiences and travel through these early adolescent years smoothly. Transition from elementary to middle school is challenging for students because they are entering a new environment with new academic demands, new adults and authority figures, new and older students, and new facilities. At the same time, they encounter many physical and developmental changes. Support and resources for parents are needed to help them prepare to ease this transition for their children and to understand the stresses their children face. Transition anxieties and developmental changes impact the move to middle school and the success children experience. However, the actions of parents can positively impact children's academic and personal success during this move.

Transition Anxieties

Studies have begun to reveal a great deal about the concerns that students have regarding the transition to middle school. When students are asked to report their worries as they enter their new school, their concerns can be categorized as (a) understanding and following rules in school and classroom and fearing authority figures, (b) forming and maintaining friendships and relationships with peers, (c) understanding academic content and requirements in many classes, (d) experiencing physical and verbal intimidation and violence, (e) learning the school layout and operation of facilities, and (f) belonging to and coping with extracurricular activities. Before transition, students report increased anxiety about most of these areas. However, as the year progresses, transition concerns fluctuate. In addition, students of different gender and ethnic groups report diverse levels and types of concerns throughout the transition year.

Developmental Changes

As students are experiencing concerns about the transition to their new environment, they also are undergoing cognitive (thinking skills), social, and physical developmental changes, which can increase their anxieties related to the new environment. Cognitively, students develop the ability to think about the deeper, more abstract meanings in ideas. These changes may make students more likely to perceive school related anxieties which, in turn, increases their transition stress. Socially, personal control over academic and social decisions is desired, as is belonging to a peer group with increased loyalty and sharing. These social needs often are not met because of the competition found in middle schools from independent work and grade comparison. As a result, peer relationships can be impacted negatively, causing stress to elevate during transition. Physically, students enter puberty and begin to feel as though everyone is watching them, creating more of a need for belonging to social groups. Additionally, students enter puberty at different times, which impacts students' concerns about their safety and ability to form peer relationships with members of the same and opposite sex.

What Parents Can Do to Ease the Move

Students are trying to cope with transition anxieties that result from entering a new school environment with new adults, peers, and academic demands. At the same time, they experience natural developmental changes, which often increase stress and require adult understanding. Parents are in the best position to support their children during this transition by understanding their children's specific worries and how their children's developmental changes impact their perception of and experience during the transition. Some specific ideas can help to alleviate your children's transition anxieties.

Easing Rules and Authority Anxieties

Taking time to meet school personnel and become familiar with school policies will help your children feel comfortable with the new authority figures and rules they encounter in middle school:

- Go to the open house at your children's new school and meet the administrators and teachers. Give your positive perceptions of the principals and teachers to your children to help them feel people at the school will support them. If you know any older children who attended the same school, have them relate their positive experiences about the administrators and teachers.
- When you receive the Code of Conduct (book of school rules and regulations) from your children's new school or school district, review it with your children. This review will ensure that they understand and are comfortable with the expectations in their new environment. If they have questions, do your best to answer them. If you are unsure of the answer, ask the administration in the new school.
- Encourage your children to get to know a supportive teacher or administrator. This relationship will help your children feel that they have someone at school they can question about rules and policies.

Easing Academic Anxieties

Parent involvement is key to student success in middle school:

- Become or remain involved in your children's academic assignments and experiences. Ask your children what they are learning, what they like about their teachers, what the requirements of their classes are, and what they are worried about in their classes.
- If grades worry your children throughout the year, ask if they need further support at home to complete work for their classes. If necessary, encourage your children to communicate their concerns or academic questions to their teachers. Let them know it is a good strategy to ask questions of their teachers. Find out when your children's school recommends that students communicate with teachers; this time may be during study hall or lunch.
- Realize that your children's concerns about academics may remain high during the entire year of transition even if they are succeeding in school. Also anticipate that their concerns may increase during the end of grading sessions or the beginning of a new semester. These worrisome times are good moments to discuss your children's study skills and needs.

Easing Peer Relationship Anxieties

You can help pave the way for your children's positive social relationships, both old and new:

- Help your children maintain their relationships with their old friends by encouraging and supervising weekend activities with their friends from elementary school.
- Support your children as they meet new peers and develop new, positive friendships.
- Encourage group activities that combine new and old friends. Strong peer relationships can help students adjust to their new school.
- Get to know the peers, and their parents, with whom your children are socializing.
- Talk to other parents with children the same age to get ideas to encourage and improve children's ability to form peer relationships in a new and larger social setting.

Easing Safety Anxieties

There are a number of strategies to help you feel more comfortable regarding your children's safety at school:

- Find out about the existence and roles of security officers at your children's school.
- Keep tabs on safety issues that concern your children. Ask them about safety concerns that they have expressed previously.
- Encourage problem solving. Help your children learn problem-solving skills they can use in concerning social situations, such as walking away from conflict or problem solving verbally with a peer.
- Help them learn ways to ask for help in school if needed. Help them locate a safe place and supportive adult at school with whom they can discuss their concerns.
- Feel comfortable discussing major concerns about your children's safety with the administration, teachers, and security staff at the school. Be there to provide your children support.

Easing School Facility Anxieties

Middle school facilities can be intimidating to children accustomed to the more self-contained environment of elementary school. Some simple steps can help:

- Encourage your children to go to the orientation for their new school. They will learn about the school layout, schedules, rules, and facilities like the lockers.
- Learn about the traditions of the school. Sharing these with your children will help them feel more comfortable in and connected to the building.

Easing Extracurricular Activity Anxieties

Middle school provides many new opportunities to explore interests:

- Encourage your children to participate in extracurricular activities. Children can learn about an interest area, develop a skill in sports or dance, or become involved in the events planned at the school.
- Encourage your children to try activities new to them to expand their knowledge and experiences.
- If the school has few extracurricular activities, help get more activities started by working with administration and teachers.

Additional Support

- Ask for support. Talk to educators and ask them what your children can expect as they move to middle school. Ask them if they have resources for you to make it easier to support your children.
- Most important, just be there to keep lines of communication open with your children so that they will feel comfortable about relating concerns they have during the year of transition. Listening to your children's issues is critical as they move through adolescence. The most recent studies show that parents still remain the most influential people in their children's lives, especially regarding long-term life issues and academics. Adolescents need to feel comfortable coming to you for support when they are faced with difficult decisions, peer pressure, or dating concerns.
- Recognize that your children's concerns will change throughout the year. At the beginning of the year, students may be more worried about the school facility and peer relationships than with academics or extracurricular activities. As the year progresses, they may become more anxious about academics. Listen to their concerns during the entire year of transition to help them reduce their anxieties.
- Children also will develop concerns associated with worldly issues and generalize these concerns to their experiences at school. For example, children may discuss their concerns about sexual harassment or prejudice. Again, listening is the first step to good communication and easing anxieties.

Parent Resources

The following resources include many other useful ideas and methods for helping children transition to middle and junior high schools.

Channing L. Bete Company, Incorporated. (1997). *What every student should know about starting middle school* [Brochure]. South Deerfield, MA: Author. (www.channing-bete.com)

Channing L. Bete Company, Incorporated. (2000). *Helping your child move on to middle school* [Brochure]. South Deerfield, MA: Author. (www.channing-bete.com)

The Parent Institute. (1999). *How to get organized for homework and school* [Brochure]. Fairfax Station, VA: Author. (www.parent-institute.com/parent/resources/)

The Parent Institute. (2002). *Moving right along: Ways parents can help children succeed in middle grades* [Brochure]. Fairfax Station, VA: Author. (www.parent-institute.com/parent/resources/)

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