

# Middle School Transition: Helping Handout for School and Home

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## INTRODUCTION

Transition to middle school is a critical time when students are coping with stressors stemming from the significant changes they are undergoing physically and mentally as well as in their environments and friendships. As a result, the transition may disrupt some students' learning and relationships, negatively affect their sense of self-worth, and intensify other problems that impede school success. During this transition, support from the school and the home is critical to preventing negative outcomes and fostering positive social, emotional, and academic success (Akos, 2002, 2006). This handout provides recommendations to teachers and staff at school and to parents and other caregivers at home to help students who are struggling with the transition to middle school.

The following are common signs that suggest a student might be struggling with the transition, for which recommendations in this handout should be considered:

- Significant and persistent behavior problems
- Dramatic drop in grades
- Significant problems in friendships or lack of friendships
- Marked sadness, anxiety, anger
- Sleep problems
- Eating problems
- Poor concentration
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Refusal to go to school
- Thinking or talking about harming self, suicide
- Delinquent behavior
- Disciplinary actions at school
- Physical and/or verbal fights at school
- Drug and alcohol use

## WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

When selecting interventions and supports, it is important to consider multiple factors that may be influencing a particular student's behavior and adjustment in middle school (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2007; Stoffner & Williamson, 2000). The following factors warrant careful consideration:

- *Intensity and history of behaviors.* The student's previous behavior patterns and tendencies are likely to reveal both strengths (e.g., healthy emotional regulation, positive approach to problem solving) and challenges (e.g., aggression, poor attitude toward school). Both strengths and challenges should be recognized when preparing for middle school transition.
- *Supports or changes at home.* The student's home supports or changes at home can create stress and anxiety that will affect the student's transition to middle school.
- *Peer relations.* In many instances peers can be a source of support; however, problems with peers (e.g., bullying, rejection) can have a negative impact on school transition.
- *Social skill deficits or disabilities.* The student's social skills are of critical importance in the transition because they affect relations with both teachers and peers.
- *Academic problems.* Among students experiencing academic challenges in elementary school, being prepared for related coursework during middle school is important.
- *A developmentally appropriate approach to caregiving.* Just because students are older and

more mature in middle school than in elementary school does not mean they no longer need caregiving, guidance, and clear boundaries. Providing students with clear expectations helps create order in their life, which helps them feel safe, confident, and able to make healthy choices. Middle school is a safe place for children to make mistakes and experience failure, but they also need help to see such failures as opportunities to learn, by changing how they do something to get a different result.

- **Supports for students with disabilities.** For students with disabilities, elementary school teachers should intentionally partner with their middle school counterparts and personalize communications among school professionals (e.g., teachers, counselors, school psychologists) as well as parents before and after their student's middle school transition (Forgan, 2000). The team should review previous assessment results and discuss the need for updated assessments.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Provide guidance to the student on how to be successful in middle school.** Middle schools have a different and more complex structure than elementary schools. Middle school campuses are often larger and serve more students, who are expected to manage the different expectations of numerous teachers and subject-specific classes for the first time. The logistical changes associated with the transition from elementary to middle school creates anxiety for many students and caregivers. Thus, it is important for school professionals to prepare students for these changes. Before the transition to middle schools, teachers and counselors often do this by reviewing the expected changes in the spring prior to the transition, and by increasing student responsibility. Many also provide students and families with opportunities to participate in tours and orientations to help students navigate the new system and environment, and to answer common questions.
2. **Provide effective and timely communication and collaboration between school and home.** School personnel (teachers, counselors, and school psychologists) and parents and other caregivers must reach out to one another early to ask for and

provide help for any student who is struggling. Ensure that the student and parents understand the expectations and the opportunities for further communication with teachers, counselors, and others at the school.

3. **Inform the student of support services and resources that are available at school.** Students struggling with the transition to middle school should be made aware of support services and resources in the school. For example, counselors and school psychologists often provide a healthy outlet for students to communicate what they are experiencing. Students may be more inclined to listen to their recommendations and guidance, at a time in development when they are less likely to listen to their parents. Be sure that the student knows where and how to seek help with academic work, as well as with social and emotional challenges.
4. **Help prepare and encourage the student to self-advocate and seek help.** Teachers, support staff, and those at home, as well as other students, would be willing to help the student by providing clarification on assignments or other support and guidance. Also, consider providing the student with an older peer mentor. For instance, unlike in elementary school, where a single teacher offers instruction across all content areas, in middle school a student is likely to have numerous teachers, each teaching specific content classes. Thus, students often need encouragement to seek out support and communication with teachers. A mentor may help a student by providing information about how to organize class materials, how to study for the assorted classes, how to schedule appointments and communicate with teachers, and how to navigate other activities that may be different in middle school.
5. **Help the student create effective organizational and planning systems.** Middle school represents an organizational challenge for many students. Parents and teachers should teach the student how to develop and follow a system for managing time demands, studying, problem solving, and completing schoolwork. Help the student track assignments and plan for completing assignments in a timely fashion. Students typically need assistance setting up their binders with dividers for each subject. Parents and educational support personnel can regularly meet with the struggling

student to check the binder, help the student remain organized, and discard unnecessary papers. In most cases, the student should also be using a planner or calendar (sometimes provided by the school) to track homework, due dates, and upcoming quizzes and tests. The student may need to be taught how to use a planner, and parents and support personnel should regularly check to see that it is used appropriately. To reduce anxiety associated with large projects, help the student divide larger assignments and projects into smaller chunks with due dates that are recorded in the planner. Check in periodically to ensure that the student is on track. Do not expect that the student will be able to manage and complete schoolwork entirely independently right away. Though some students are ready for this, many require additional support, so reduce support only when the student demonstrates the ability to handle work independently.

6. **Foster positive peer relationships and psychological well-being.** Ways to do this include the following:

- Encourage the student to spend time with friends who are positive role models, while also limiting or restricting the amount of time spent with friends who are poor role models.
- Assess whether the student's social and emotional needs are being sufficiently met at school, at home, and in the community. This might be done either informally or formally.
- Enroll, or encourage the student to enroll, in teams, groups, interest clubs, and service organizations. Students benefit more when they explore and identify activities in which they are interested and become involved. This effort promotes friendships, fosters engagement in school, and helps buffer students from negative experiences in school.
- Foster the development of long-term peer relationships by building and supporting school-based and community-based peer mentoring programs before the transition.

7. **Develop sound homework habits.** Have a set time and place for doing homework. Although many students in middle school prefer to do their homework independently in their room, it is often best to set them up in an area that can be easily monitored, so assistance can be readily provided. Teach the student how to set a timer for 20-minute

increments of work time followed by a 5-minute break. Even when there is no homework to do, the student can use that time to study for upcoming exams, work on assignments in advance, and strengthen core skills (e.g., increase vocabulary by reading in an area of interest). It is important that this be a consistent amount of time each day. When the student is finished with the homework, give it a quick check to ensure that it is complete and encourage the student to put it in a place to ensure that it gets to school.

8. **Monitor the student's grades.** Many school systems now use easily accessible online systems that allow students and parents to monitor grades, missing assignments, and due dates. Set aside a consistent time each week to check this system with the student, and teach and encourage the student to use the system independently to keep track of progress. For many students, using these systems to track how they're doing is motivating because it allows them to see their success and receive concrete information on how to improve their grades (e.g., specific assignments they can complete). When parents and caregivers notice that a student is not performing well in class, it is important to be proactive and seek help from teachers early. Through communication with teachers, it is often possible for the student to receive additional assistance during the school day or immediately after school.
9. **Ensure that foundational skills have been mastered.** Do not assume that the student has mastered all of the foundational academic skills (e.g., basic math, math facts, reading ability) that are the focus of elementary school. If the student is struggling academically, assess the student's proficiency in these basic skills. It will be very challenging for the student to succeed in middle school classes without the preparation necessary to learn the material. If the student has not mastered basic skills, provide or arrange for targeted, intensive instruction in areas of skill deficits.
10. **Encourage healthy sleep and eating habits.** During adolescence, it is critical for students to get enough sleep (approximately 8–10 hours each night), yet many do not. Students often need guidance to go to bed at a reasonable time. Help the student plan schoolwork in advance so it does not become necessary to stay up too

late scrambling to complete assignments and cramming for tests. Remove electronic devices from the student's room to reduce the temptation to stay up too late. Similarly, ensure that the student is regularly getting enough nutritious food to eat (e.g., including fruits and vegetables, and minimizing caffeine) and understands the importance of healthy eating habits. Students have more freedom to choose what they eat at this age, but they may lack wisdom about making choices that will help them feel good and learn effectively.

11. **Help establish healthy personal hygiene habits.** During adolescence, many physical and biological changes result in an increasing need to engage in personal hygiene that will reduce embarrassment and increase confidence for middle school students. At home, students often need support to be certain that they wear clean clothes each day, that they brush their teeth at least twice each day, that they wash their body and face daily with products designed to clean sensitive skin, and that they wear antiperspirant deodorant to reduce the odor from sweat. Body odor, smelly feet, bad breath, damaged teeth, and skin acne can all be embarrassing for the student and may lead to problems with peers at school. At home, it is important to recognize that the student may need extra time in the morning and at night to do these activities, and it is important to be patient and also give the student some privacy when learning these important life skills. At school, it is important to teach students about health and hygiene.
12. **Create healthy habits with technology.** Students should be given clear rules and expectations concerning the use of technology both at school and at home. For example, at home make sure no screens or other electronic devices are available during homework time. If the student must use a computer to complete homework, turn off instant messaging and restrict access to social media. Getting personal electronic devices back can motivate the student to work efficiently. For many students, it is important to limit or entirely restrict access to video games, television, computers, and cell phones during the school week. However, since time spent engaging in these activities can be highly motivating for adolescents, these are powerful rewards for meeting parents' and caregivers' expectations. If the student is using technological devices inappropriately or their use

is getting in the way of success in school and life, help by limiting access or removing it altogether. Allow the student to earn devices back or earn time on devices once short- and long-term goals and expectations have been met.

13. **Stay positive and optimistic.** Model a level-headed, reasonable approach to completing work and achieving academic success. This is a time of great upheaval, growth, and change, and students require caring adults to navigate it successfully. Be forgiving, as middle school is a good time to make and learn from mistakes when the stakes are still relatively low. Let students know that you expect them to try their best to be successful in school and life and that you are here to support them. Provide them with clear and reasonable expectations, and celebrate with them when they are successful.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Websites

<https://www.amle.org/>

This website for the Association for Middle Level Education features many professional development resources for teachers of middle school students.

### Books and Materials

Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE). (2017). *Supporting students in their transition to middle school*. AMLE position paper jointly adopted by the National Middle School Association and the National Association of Elementary School Principals. <http://www.nppsd.org/vimages/shared/vnews/stories/525d81ba96ee9/Tr%20-%20Supporting%20Students%20in%20Their%20Transition%20to%20Middle%20School.pdf>

This document provides a brief summary of many practice considerations and strategies for parents, teachers, counselors, and school leaders to support students during the transition to middle school.

Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. (2017). *Addressing barriers to successful middle school transition*. Los Angeles, CA: Author. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/middlesch.pdf>

This document offers parents and teachers valuable information and strategies to consider to support student transitions, before and during the transition year.

Georgia Department of Education. (n.d.). *Middle school matters: A guide for Georgia schools on middle school transition*. Atlanta, GA: Author.

<https://www.gadoe.org/School-Improvement/Federal-Programs/Documents/Parent%20Engagement/Final%20Middle%20School%20Transition%20Toolkit.pdf>

This toolkit is a comprehensive resource that includes much valuable information and many valuable worksheets to help facilitate transitions to middle school.

Lorain, P. (n.d.). *Transition to middle school*. National Education Association. <http://www.nea.org/tools/16657.htm>

This document provides valuable information for parents and teachers to consider when preparing to support students before and during their transition to middle school.

### Related Handouts

Friendships—Lacking a Friend and Feeling Lonely: Helping Handout for School and Home

Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for Home

Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for School

### REFERENCES

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