

HELPING YOUR CHILD WITH THE TRANSITION FROM MIDDLE SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL

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Not so very long ago your child was entering middle school and was tied up in knots worrying about how he would find his way in the huge new school, if he would have any friends, and if the classes would be too tough. Now he's facing high school, and guess what he's worried about? The same things. Plus he knows that now it really counts. He needs to decide if he's aiming for college or the workforce. He definitely must accumulate enough credits to graduate and may need to pass a state-mandated exit exam. And then there's dating, getting a driver license, and his first job...

OK. Slow down, just a bit. High school is a time of great change and numerous "firsts" and transitions. Luckily, you and your student don't have to cope with all of them at once, and certainly not all during his first few weeks as a freshman. So let's take a relaxed look at what *is* important during the transition from middle school to high school, and what extra concerns may crop up for your child with learning difficulties.

What parents can do:

Parents should also know that the transition period is more than just the first few weeks of school. Many schools treat the transition as a long-term process, beginning in the 8th grade and continuing through the 9th, and provide multiple avenues of support and information to help freshmen settle in socially and academically

- **Choosing Freshman Courses: the First Transition Step**

Students know that what happens in high school really counts. Course selection and grades help determine which paths are open immediately after high school. That's a good reason for you and your child to thoroughly understand the choices offered by the high school as you register for freshman classes during eighth grade.

- **You and your student need to be aware of any flexibility or "tracks" available within the required freshman course work.**

For instance, does one version of freshman algebra lead on to trigonometry and calculus, whereas another version fulfills the math requirement but doesn't prepare the student for more advanced courses? Understanding these details allows you to choose the ninth-grade courses most appropriate for your child

without inadvertently closing off some academic pathways as he moves through high school.

It's a tricky task for students and parents to choose courses that maximize post-high school options. The average eighth-grader doesn't know for certain if he's headed to college, vocational training, or to a job after high school. That natural uncertainty makes leaving many paths open all the more important.

Work with your student's guidance counselor to come up with an appropriate balance of academic and elective courses for your child's freshman year.

- **Be Prepared to Make Changes**

You may find that the study strategies and accommodations that have worked well up to this point are no longer adequate. This is because continued cognitive development means your adolescent is beginning to think more abstractly, use more complex reasoning, and form his own opinions. His school work all through high school reflects this and becomes increasingly demanding.

Keep a close eye on how your child is handling his workload.

- ✓ Do the increased reading demands warrant a switch to audio textbooks?
- ✓ Does your student need to tape class lectures?
- ✓ Would a laptop computer help him take better, more thorough notes?

Changing approaches and adding strategies as your child progresses through his first year and beyond will help keep things on track.

- **There's More to High School Than Classes**

Extracurricular activities, sports, and social functions are just as much a part of the high school experience as classes. Research shows that involvement in activities makes the high school transition easier for freshmen with learning disabilities as well as for those without. And, since the high school years are a remarkable period of self-exploration and identity development, extra-curricular activities are a great way for your student to try new things, show off his strengths, and connect with peers with similar interests.

High schools offer many special-interest clubs, such as computers, drama, debate, and photography. There is usually a broader range of sports available than in middle school, and many sports teams need students to help with support functions, such as scorekeeping. Your child can get involved in student government, activity planning (dances, rallies, etc.), leadership, and community volunteering.

Encourage your child to participate.

- **Stay Involved**

Your involvement in the high school transition is just as important as your child's involvement in school activities. Your student is entering a phase of great change, and support from parents is essential. Even if your student seems more likely to push you away than ask for guidance, keep the lines of communication open. Get to know your child's friends. Be aware of school functions and encourage your child to join in. Find out where the school needs parent volunteers.

Your active support and participation will help ensure a successful transition into high school.

- **Getting Involved**

- ✓ Attend orientation programs for incoming freshmen and their families.
- ✓ Participate in school tours.
- ✓ Become familiar with the student handbook and the school website.
- ✓ Discuss with your child who to talk to or where to go to solve problems that crop up in the first few days.
- ✓ Meet teachers during back-to-school nights.
- ✓ Attend parent-teacher conferences.
- ✓ Welcome his friends into your home so you can get to know them.

EASING YOUR CHILD'S TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Do you cringe when you hear the words middle school or junior high? If so, then you are not alone. For many of us, those years were filled with emotional turmoil and a sense of awkwardness about our growing bodies. How can we make the experience better for our kids?

What can Parents Do to Help?

✓ **Be upbeat about what lies ahead**

Don't say things about your bad junior high experience. They respect you and listen to you, even when they don't appear to." Instead capitalize on the positive aspects of the experience: a chance to learn about many different subjects, meet new people, and grow into a young adult.

✓ **Recognize their fears**

Most incoming seventh graders worry about being the new kids on the block. They have moved from being big fish in a little pond to being guppies in a huge lake. Some children are also afraid of the "big kids." Tell your child that the school is a safe place. We are watching out for them. Some fears seem minor to us, but are monumental to our children. They fear they will not be able to open their lockers. They are afraid they will forget which class they are supposed to go to. They are insecure about making mistakes. Assure them that they are not alone in their feelings. Give your child strategies to help her cope in these next few weeks. She can practice with combination locks at home. She can tape her schedule to the inside of her binder.

✓ **Offer support**

Talk to your child about the school day. Ask how things are going. Be understanding and open. Time with your child is the most critical factor. Not the kind of time you spend when you are cooking dinner, but time

alone together. But don't ask too many questions. Give them space.”

✓ **Hold your child accountable**

You can bet the teachers will. In junior high and middle school, your child is responsible for getting to classes on time. He is responsible for his grades and for completing homework assignments.

✓ **Give your child the opportunity to make decisions on her own**

What is a good bedtime? How much sleep does she need? Let her experiment, within reason. But don't let your child stay home from school just because she's tired. Allow for natural consequences of her actions. Provide resources to assist her decision-making process. Help her use good common sense.

✓ **Pick your battles**

Decide what is important to you and what you can let slide. If the outfit your child is wearing is modest and meets school guidelines, consider letting her wear it. The bigger the deal you make of it, the more she is going to want to do it. Be patient; be tolerant; it's a phase.

✓ **Give them the tools they need to succeed**

Although our children now bear much of the responsibility for the outcomes ahead, we still need to provide them with the right tools for success. Make sure they have a well-supplied area for homework that is free from distractions. In addition to a good dictionary, thesaurus and calculator, consider supplying your child with an academic planner.

✓ **Allow them the freedom to make mistakes**

This is one of the most critical aspects of being a junior high or middle school parent. Know that they will make mistakes. Expect it. They are on an emotional roller coaster. They are children one day and adults the next. They want to be different, but they want to fit in. This is a great time in their life to make mistakes. Know that you've done a good job. Know that this time will pass.