School Transitions: The Impact on Middle School and High School Students

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Making the transition to a higher grade or new school is one of the most exciting and frightening experiences of an adolescent's life. Many sixth and eighth grade students are full of hope and enthusiasm at the thought of going to a new school. Making a transition to a new school offers a multitude of opportunities such as creating a whole new identity, making new friends, being involved in new activities, starting over academically, continuing his/her academic success, and gaining independence from one’s parents. On the other end of the spectrum, many students enter a higher grade or a new school with uncertainty and apprehension. Both female and male students fear teasing from upperclassmen, academic failure, social failure, and learning to survive in a new territory. These new stressors and challenges combined with adolescence can contribute to either a positive or negative experience for each transitioning student.

Early adolescence is an awkward and challenging time for most youth developmentally and academically. The transition from elementary to middle school usually occurs at this same period of development. Shifting from elementary to middle school poses several challenges for a transitioning student. Green and Ollendick (1993) characterize the transition as, “a shift from the highly supportive, nurturing environment of elementary school to a more complex system of several teachers (instead of just one), rotating classrooms, and 50-minute doses of specialized instruction” (p. 163). Alspaugh (1998), points out that the goals of elementary school tend to be more task oriented, whereas in middle school more focus is placed on performance. Changes in authority and discipline, time structure, role definition, and status are also to be considered. The student switches from being the oldest in the school to the youngest (Green & Ollendick, 1993).

Early adolescence and the transition from elementary to middle school can present itself as a tumultuous time for a young student. The stress of this trying time may bring about emotional and behavioral disturbances. Alspaugh (1998) has noted that research indicates that students transitioning from lower to higher grades, independent of age, grade levels, and ability level, have reduced self-perception and self-esteem. Alspaugh and Hatting (1995) found that students transitioning from self-contained elementary schools to intermediate-level schools suffer a loss in academic achievement. It is noted that during early adolescence, middle school years in particular, the rates for juvenile crime, drug abuse, adolescent pregnancy and suicide increase (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Lipsitz, 1980 cited in Green & Ollendick, 1993). Such problem behaviors tend to peak during the high school years, but some make the argument that these prevailing issues are a result of unresolved issues from the middle school period (Green & Ollendick, 1993). This idea places much emphasis on the middle school years as being crucial and fundamental in the development of a stable student. Petersen (1988) states that most adolescents successfully recover from the stress and pressure associated with transitioning to higher grades and into young adulthood. The stressors and challenges that most transitioning students face can be made easier with helpful intervention and prevention programs.

After middle school, the next transition that a student makes is to high school. Eighth graders transitioning to high school face some of the same challenges as fifth graders transitioning to middle school. Once again the student transitioning to high school experiences a change in status. They switch from being the oldest in the school back to being the youngest. Other factors to be considered are larger school size, different academic requirements, and new social interactions (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Upon entering high school, eighth grade students are coming out of the most physically and emotionally tumultuous period of their young lives. Eighth graders transitioning to high school are still experiencing physical, emotional, and psychological changes. They are coming into young adulthood, striving for independence from their families, and trying to maintain a sense of identity while trying to be socially accepted.

As noted with the transition to middle school, some students transitioning to high school experience lowered self-esteem and a decline in grades (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Some students experience a decrease in motivation to learn. Some authors suggest that a student unable to effectively cope with the transition to high school may drop out (Letrello & Miles, 2003; Alspaugh, 1998). According to Chmelynski (2004) students that make it to the tenth grade will most likely graduate. Fortunately, much of the literature in the field suggests that a student’s ability to successfully
cope with the transition to high school may be moderated by the extent to which the student is prepared for the transition (Wallis & Barrett, 1998). In interviews with students from both populations, the impact of adolescence is reflected in the students’ fears and excitement about their upcoming transitions.

The interviewees consisted of two female and two male fifth grade students at an elementary school with a population of 220 students, and three female eighth grade students at a middle school with a total of 763 students in the Southeast. When asking the middle school students about how they felt about going to middle school, most responded with, “nervous” and “excited.” In regards to being excited, one male student stated, “I’m ready to go. I feel like I could do good there. I’m ready to leave elementary” (T. Campbell, personal communication, November 12, 2004). Another male student said that he was excited about “changing classes.” Others stated that they were excited about “meeting new people” and “learning new stuff.” In regards to being nervous, a female student responded with, “I’m nervous because it’s my first time with older kids” (S. Mitchell, personal communication, November 12, 2004).

The students were also asked about their biggest fears. One male student responded with, “I ain’t scared of nothing” (B. Johnson, personal communication, November 12, 2004). One female student stated that her fears were related to, “the classes and the work they are going to give me. It may be hard” (S. Mitchell, personal communication, November 12, 2004). The students were also asked to tell about some of the things or stories that they had heard about middle school. Some responses included, “the teachers are hilarious,” “people get into many fights,” “if you do bad you can go to ISS or get suspended.” One female respondent was concerned with “guns and violence.” When asked how have their parents, teachers, and counselors have helped them to prepare for the transition they stated, “telling me to try my best,” “pass the CRCT,” and “telling me to focus and study hard.”

All three middle school students commented that they are nervous about attending high school. One student remarked, “I’m kinda nervous because I can’t comprehend that well” (N. Wright, personal communication, November 12, 2004). While the other two attributed their nervousness to, “. . . meeting new people and getting adjusted to a new school” and “high school is a whole new territory, and high school students might pick on you (freshmen)” (J. Knoll & C. Wilkes, personal communication, November 12, 2004). Another concern the students shared was being bullied by upperclassmen, and either witnessing or taking part in a lot of fights. They had all heard stories about fights and bullying from the stories current high schools students had told them. The girls relayed that they had received a lot of contradicting advice about high school from parents, teachers, and current high school students. Their advice included comments such as “high school would be hard,” “it would be easy,” and “it was interesting and fun.” One student’s mother warned her, “It’s not going to get any easier!” (J. Knoll, personal communication, November 12, 2004).

Amid all this contradictory and negative advice, the middle school students still expressed excitement about entering high school and shared that they had support from various people in their lives. All three girls were enthusiastic about getting out of middle school, getting closer to finishing high school, and meeting new people which is scary and exciting at the same time. All three girls felt the most support for their transition from middle school to high school came from teachers and their school counselor. Their teachers are working hard to prepare them academically while the school counselor has been providing encouragement and guidance lessons which cover topics such as study skills and the special academic programs that reside in the area high schools.

**Recommendations**

Successful transition programs often include these attributes: a sensitivity to the anxieties accompanying a move to a new school setting, the importance of parents and teachers as partners in this effort, and the recognition that becoming comfortable in a new school setting is an ongoing process, not a single event (National Middle School Association, 2004). It must be emphasized that the transition process is a long term process. Making the full academic and social adjustment to a new school does not happen overnight. Therefore, many educators and counselors opt to start transition activities and programs before the move to a new school or higher grade is initiated. Transition programs and activities should cater to the whole support system as well as the transitioning student. Enhancing social support systems help the student to connect to the school at a point where students’ normal support networks may be disrupted (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Patrick Akos, a prominent researcher of the transition process, suggests the following guidelines for school counselors coordinating transition programs: (a) roles, expectations, and responsibilities are the primary concern of students and should be presented early in fifth grade and infused throughout the transition year (this is also an...
excellent opportunity to include administrators and teachers in transition programming); (b) school counselors have an opportunity both to address concerns and stressors and to promote positive aspects of the transition to middle school; (c) transition programs should include peers, family, and teachers as students look to significant others for help; and (d) transition programs should evolve throughout the transition year as student perceptions and needs change (2002). These suggestions that are offered could easily be adapted for the transition to high school.

Elementary school students often benefit from a tour of a middle school which may include lunch and an overview of the disciplinary rules, letters or visits from sixth grade students describing their experiences in middle school, problem solving and social skills training, and school ambassador/peer helping programs (Akos, 2002). Typical transition activities for middle school students include registering for high school courses, lectures from a high school principal, tours of the local high school, peer panels, and mentor-mentee relationships between upperclassmen and incoming freshmen (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Parents and other primary caretakers should be involved in the transition process as well. They can perform simple, ordinary tasks to ease the transition. Helpful tasks include asking open-ended questions about the student’s school day, schedule regular meeting with teachers, counselors, and administrators, give the student more demanding household chores, and provide and maintain a familiar home structure (San Diego City Schools, 2003). Parents and caretakers can also benefit from transition activities similar to ones designed for students. A similar activity targeted toward parents is a "Q&A" night which includes representatives from the central office and the middle/high schools their children would be attending. The representatives should include a principal or assistant principal from each school (if you feed to more than one) as well as a “parent-friendly” member of one of the teacher teams (Mahoney, n.d.). Also taking a tour of a middle school or high school and a “meet the teacher” night would provide an opportunity for parents and teachers to start establishing a collaborative relationship.

In conclusion, making the transition from a lower grade to a higher grade can present itself to be a very stressful and challenging event for most students. When transitioning to higher grades students may experience a multitude of mixed emotions. Some are excited, nervous, anxious, and fearful about what awaits them. Much of the research suggests that most students successfully make it through the transition. These successful transitions are partly attributed to programs and activities that help to promote a smooth adjustment. To ensure that a successful transition occurs, it is the responsibility of parents, teachers, counselors, and other school administrators to communicate with one another and provide programs, activities, and the social support that is needed to foster a smooth transition.

References


Nikki Earl is completing her Masters in Education in School Counseling. She enjoyed an internship at a local elementary school and looks forward to another semester there.

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