

Transition to Middle School Project Newsletter

Family Studies Lab, University of Illinois

SUMMER 1998

DO YOU REMEMBER MIDDLE SCHOOL?

Do you remember moving from elementary school to middle school? Do you recall how you felt? What you worried about? Do you remember your relationship with your parents at that time? Your relationships with your friends?

The transition to middle school can be a difficult time for kids, especially when it means changing schools. Often, a middle school means changing teachers for the first time, instead of having one teacher for all subjects. Middle school may also mean a bigger building and many more students. Teachers expect more from middle school students than they do from elementary students. Classes tend to become more impersonal, more formal, and more competitive. There is an increased emphasis on grades and performance evaluations.

At the same time, children are entering adolescence. They are seeking independence and autonomy from their parents. At this time, many kids begin to spend more time with their peers, and peer influence grows. Kids also begin to experience

physical changes to their bodies, often at different rates than their peers. They may begin to think about dating. All of these factors may combine to create a heightened self-consciousness. This is a time when children especially need the personal support and attention of adults, such as their parents, teachers, and other role models.

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Many studies have found that the transition to middle school has a negative impact on students. Grades often drop, which may lead to a decrease in students' perceptions of their academic competence, as well as declines in their academic motivation and interest in learning. Some research shows that girls find this transition especially difficult. For example, girls' self-esteem tends to drop following the transition. All of these changes may also increase kids'

stress levels. On the other hand, some children seem to cope with the transition quite effectively.

Putting together all of this information, the University of Illinois Family Studies lab thought that it was very important to study how children negotiate this transition. Through the Transition to Middle School Project, we compared 5th and 6th graders who were about to experience a school transition to children who stayed in the same schools from 5th to 6th grade, in order to learn more about how kids handle this transition.

Thanks to your participation, we've been able to gain a greater understanding of kids' social, academic, and psychological adjustment during this challenging period.

This newsletter is a chance for us to share some of our results with you. We hope this information will help you to gain a sense of the experiences of your children and students as they begin adolescence.

QUIZ: WHAT DO KIDS WORRY ABOUT?

What percentage of children do you think ranked the following items as "what they worry about most"? (answers on page 3)

- _____ Doing well in school
- _____ Being popular
- _____ Getting along with parents
- _____ Parents getting along with each other

INSIDE:

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Educators, Parents, and Students,

We would like to thank you for your participation in the Transition to Middle School Project sponsored by the Family Studies Lab at the University of Illinois. Our goal has been to learn about children's experiences when they move from elementary school into middle school. In order to find out more about these experiences, we met with over 600 5th and 6th graders from 14 schools across central Illinois. Students attended schools in both rural and urban communities in Champaign, Sangamon, and Vermilion Counties. Some students experienced a transition during the course of the study, but others remained in the same school. We asked students, teachers, and parents about children's experiences related to school, peers, and home during the spring of the fifth grade. We then followed up with these children in the fall of the sixth grade to see how things were going.

We are excited to share with you some of the interesting discoveries that we have made over the past two years. We hope that you find this newsletter informative. The information provided by this study is already being incorporated into programs designed to help children cope with the types of stressful experiences that they encounter during this challenging period. Without your help, this project would not have been possible, so once again we thank you and look forward to working with you again in the future.

If you have any questions or if you would like to hear more about other projects that are currently underway in the Family Studies Lab, please call us at the number listed at the end of the newsletter.

Sincerely,
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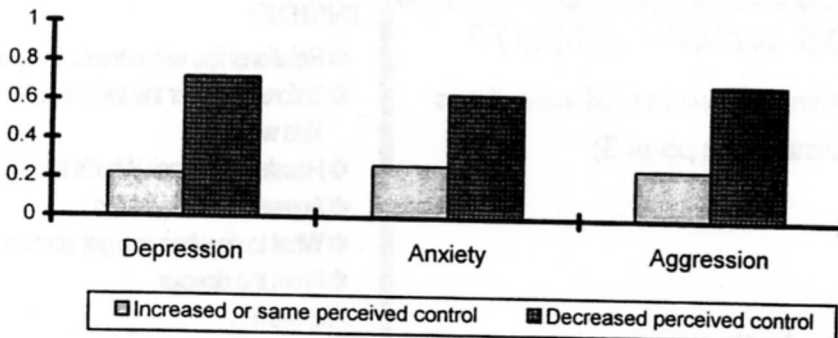
DO I HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO DO WELL IN SCHOOL?

Kids told us how much they thought they could control how well they were doing at school. Kids who did not make a school transition reported higher feelings of control about their academic work when we

talked to them the second time than when we had spoken to them the previous year. It seems that staying in the same school enhances students' sense of mastery over their academic success. This is good news because

perceived control about academics affects how kids feel at school. Kids who reported less control about their school success during the second year than the first year were more depressed, anxious, and aggressive than kids whose perceived control over academics increased or stayed the same. So helping students to feel that they are in control of their school performance is an important goal for middle schools to work on during the transition period.

Differences in Perceived Control about Academics



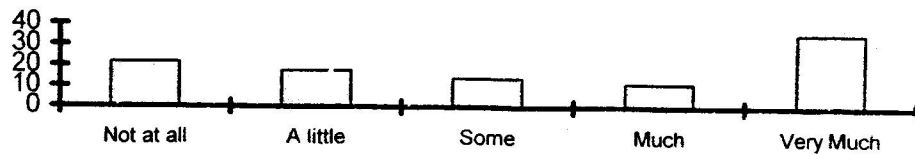
BEFORE AND AFTER THE TRANSITION

We asked 5th-graders how worried they were about going to middle school. Most kids said that they were at least a little bit worried and 36% said that they were "very worried." We checked in with them again, after they had started middle school. After the transition, when we asked kids how worried they were about middle school, most kids said "Not at all."

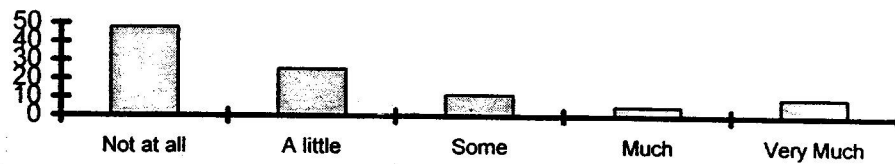
So, for most kids, middle school wasn't as bad as they had expected. Still, kids who had made a transition to middle school told us that they were more stressed about school.

Because some kids do experience difficulty during the initial transition period, activities to prepare kids for the transition are important. Visits to the new school and the opportunity to talk with current students about what middle school is like may ease problems at the transition.

How worried are you about going to middle school next year?



How worried are you about middle school this year?



RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND PEERS

As kids get older, they begin to spend more time with friends. And the role of the peer group becomes more important, especially during adolescence. Adolescents are particularly concerned with what their peers think of them and they may evaluate themselves in terms of their peer relationships. But that doesn't necessarily mean that relationships with peers are more important to kids than their relationships with parents. We found that kids' experiences with both parents and peers affect how they are feeling and how they perform at school.

We asked kids to tell us about their relationships with their parents and their peers. They told us about how much time they spent in these relationships, how well they got along with parents and peers, and if they had problems in these relationships. Girls and boys reported about the same amount of "stress" that they experienced in their relationships with parents and peers. But problems with parents and problems with peers had different meanings for girls and boys.

Relationships and how kids feel

Girls who had problems in their relationships with their parents were more depressed and acted out more than girls who didn't have problems with their parents. Relationships with peers didn't matter in this regard. For boys, the opposite was true. Boys who had problems in their peer relationships were more depressed and more aggressive than boys who didn't have problems with their peers. Boys' problems with parents weren't related to their feelings of sadness or acting out behavior.

Relationships and school performance

Problems in relationships also affect how teachers think kids are performing at school. Teachers told us how hard they thought kids were working and how much they were learning at school. Boys who had problems with peers weren't working as hard and were learning less than boys who didn't have peer problems. For girls, relationships with peers didn't make a difference for their school performance, but relationships with parents did. Girls

who thought they had problems with parents weren't working as hard and were learning less than girls who didn't have problems with parents.

Girls versus boys: Why the difference?

Our results suggest that girls and boys respond differently to problems in their relationships with parents and peers. Because girls and boys told us that they experienced similar levels of stress, we don't think that girls and boys differ in the amount of stress that they experience in their relationships. It is possible that girls and boys differ in how important these types of relationships are for their self-esteem. Or, girls and boys may have different styles of responding to stress from friends and stress from parents. These different styles of coping may affect how they are feeling and performing at school. We are currently examining how kids respond to relationship stress and whether coping strategies are associated with how kids are feeling. We'll keep you posted on what we find. Look for the results in the next issue!

HASSLES: WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

What's my locker combination?
Who will I sit with at lunch?
Are they talking about me?

These are common concerns for kids in middle school. They don't seem like much, but it turns out that these little things do make a difference for how kids experience school.

Top 10 Hassles Kids Reported:

1. School has too many rules
2. Too much homework
3. Physical changes
4. Getting up for school in the morning
5. Cafeteria food
6. School is large and crowded
7. Not enough time between classes
8. Friends from previous year at different school
9. Looking younger or older than others in your grade
10. Teachers expect too much

Kids told us about what kinds of things are hassles for them in middle school. Academic expectations, the

physical structure of the school, and getting along with school personnel and other kids at school are all things that kids perceive as school hassles. Even though none of these seems like a big deal by itself, having to deal with many of these hassles on a daily basis does have an impact on kids.

The number of hassles kids encounter at school is associated with how appropriately teachers think they are behaving, how hard they are working in class, and their overall academic performance. Hassles also affect how happy kids feel at school. So, the little things do make a difference.

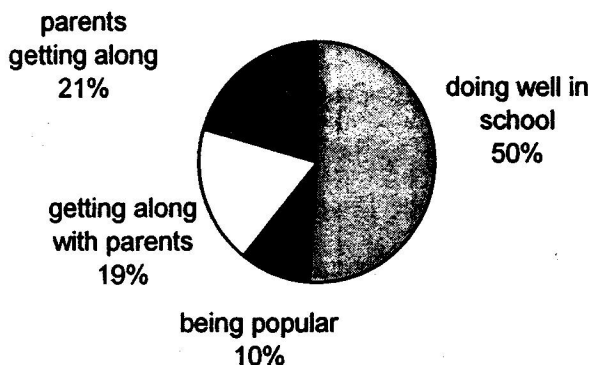
Kids who made a transition reported more hassles than kids who didn't change schools. We talked to kids in the fall of their transition year. We expect that as kids spend more time in middle school, the structure of the school environment will feel like less of a hassle. And, over time, we think that kids will adjust to the changes in expectations and the different peer group. But, during the initial transition, it's important to remember what these little things can mean for students.

Stressed out?

Here are some things you can do:

- **DO SOMETHING FUN**
Play your favorite sport
Go to a movie
Learn something new on your computer
Work on a hobby
- **RELAX**
Count backwards, slowly, from 10 to 1, making sure to take deep breaths
Close your eyes and think about something that makes you happy
Tighten up all the muscles in your body, count to 5, and let go
Meditate
- **DO SOMETHING TO TAKE YOUR MIND OFF OF YOUR TROUBLES**
Read a book
Go for a walk
Listen to music
- **THINK POSITIVE**
List of all the things that you like about yourself
Think about the good things in your life
- **LET SOMEONE KNOW HOW YOU ARE FEELING**
Talk to a friend, parent, sibling, teacher, or coach
Write a letter
- **EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS**
Write in your journal
Paint or draw
Write a poem or story

Answer: What do kids worry about?



DO KIDS AND TEACHERS AGREE?

Sometimes it may not seem possible, but kids and teachers do agree on some things. When we visited your schools, we asked kids to tell us about their feelings and behavior. We also asked teachers to tell us about how they thought their students were feeling and behaving. Students' and teachers' reports weren't completely in sync--there was more agreement between reports about behavior than reports about

feelings. Nonetheless, kids' reports about themselves and teachers' reports about their students were quite similar.

If kids reported that they acted out, teachers tended to report that these kids were aggressive. When kids reported that they felt sad or down, teachers reported that these same kids were withdrawn and depressed. So, teachers notice not only kids' behavior, but also how

their students are feeling. We think that this is significant because it demonstrates that teachers notice more than just directly observable characteristics in their students--teachers are also sensitive to kids' emotions. Considerable research indicates that both behavior and feelings have implications for how kids perform academically and socially at school.

We hope that you have enjoyed hearing about the Transition to Middle School Project. We are excited by what we have learned so far and plan to continue our work with families and schools. As we gather more information, we will continue to provide this type of feedback to participating families and schools.

Thank you for your involvement in our program. Your cooperation has allowed us to learn a great deal about what the transition to middle school and the transition to adolescence mean for children and families. We hope that you find these initial results useful and we look forward to working with you in the future. Please let us know if you have any comments about the project.

If you have any questions about the project, please do not hesitate to contact us by mail or phone:

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Champaign, IL 61820
(217) 244-9385

Thank you for your participation! This research would not be possible without your help. We appreciate your contribution to our understanding of adolescence.

-Family Studies Lab

Moving? Please let us know. We would like to stay in touch.

Please fill out the following information, and mail it to the Family Studies Lab.

Our address is above.

Thanks!

(Please print)

Child's Name: _____

Your Name: _____

New Address: _____

New Phone Number: _____