

Transition to Middle School Project Newsletter

Family Studies Lab, University of Illinois

WINTER 2000

HOW DO I KNOW IF MY STUDENT OR TEENAGER NEEDS HELP?

Many teachers and parents notice that their teenagers seem to feel "up" one moment and "down" the next. How can a teacher or parent know whether a teenager is experiencing normal mood swings or feeling so down that they might benefit from help? Here are some rules of thumb:

Many teenagers go through normative changes...

Many teenagers spend more time alone in their bedrooms, more time with friends, and less time with family than they did during childhood. Teenagers may also want more independence, question adults' decisions more, and be more irritable than they were during childhood. Many teachers and parents notice these moderate changes and they are not usually cause for concern.

Sometimes loneliness and friendlessness are indicators...

If a teenager doesn't have friends to talk with over the phone, sit with at lunchtime, or spend free time with, they may be feeling sad and lonely. It can be easy to overlook the needs of such teenagers because they often don't cause any problems in the classroom or at home and may be academically successful.

Teenagers who have a trusting relationship with adults and friends have more sources of support to help them when they are feeling down.

Sometimes aggressive and disruptive teenagers are also feeling down...

Aggressive and disruptive teenagers are often referred for help

because they may cause problems in the classroom and at home. Though aggressive teenagers are often referred to programs that help control their anger and teach skills for resolving conflicts constructively, they are sometimes also in need of help with more hidden difficulties, such as feelings of sadness.

Sometimes you just have to ask...

Some children who are feeling down may not express their concerns outwardly through social difficulties, anger, or disruptiveness. In this case, teachers and parents may not know how teenagers are feeling unless they ask. Teenagers who have a trusting relationship with adults and friends have more sources of support to help them when they are feeling down.

QUIZ: DO KIDS WANT TO BE CHALLENGED AT SCHOOL?

How important do you think that it is for most children to feel challenged by their school work? (answers on page 4)

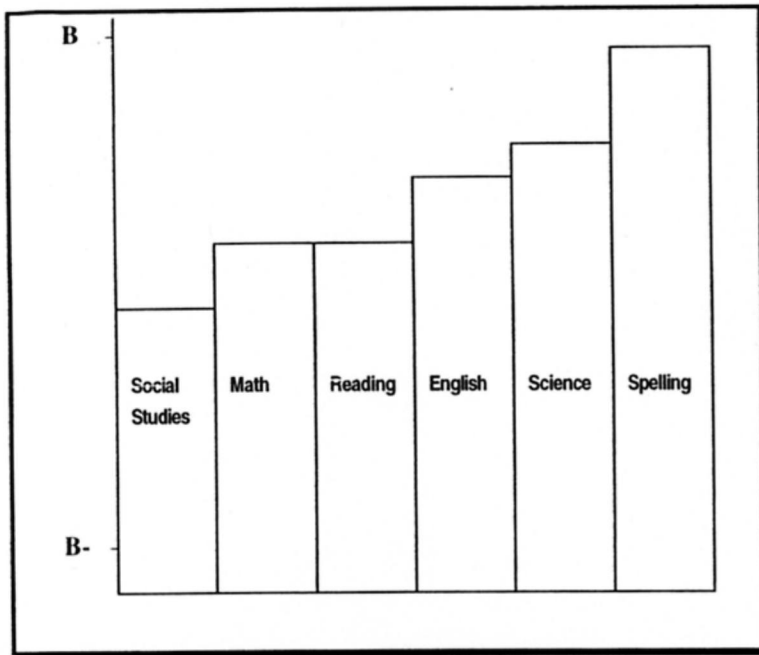
- Not at all important
- A little important
- Somewhat important
- Very important

INSIDE :

- * Making the grade!
- * Is 6th grade harder than 5th?
- * The challenges of middle school
- * What do kids care about?
- * School Hassles
- And more ...

MAKING THE GRADE!

Last year, the kids who participated in our project did very well overall on their grades. Average grades in each subject fell in the B- to B range. Here's a look at grades by subject:



What are some things that are related to students' grades? We found that grades tended to be lower for students who:

- ◆ Were sensitive to the challenges at school – such as negotiating the school environment, dealing with teachers, handling classes and workload, and fitting in with peers.
- ◆ Felt they did not have much control over their academic work – that despite their efforts, they were not able to get good grades, do well on tests, or succeed.
- ◆ Did not think doing well in school and getting good grades was very important. (This was particularly true in science.)

So what's the moral of this story?

ATTITUDE can make a difference!

Sometimes, if you *really* believe you can do well, you can!



IS 6TH GRADE HARDER THAN 5TH?



Many people assume that middle school is much tougher than elementary school. After all, the classwork might be harder or there might be more homework. Also, 6th graders have to adjust to changing classes and to no longer being the oldest kids in the school. We wondered if 6th graders really did think that middle school was harder than 5th grade. Overall, 6th graders told us that middle school is a little tougher. For example, getting good grades and doing well in school was easier in 5th grade. The 6th graders also said that they spend more time on their homework and that classwork is more difficult.

Besides schoolwork, it is possible that 6th graders have a harder time in other areas of their lives. Fitting in or getting along with other kids may be harder, for example. We found that

for boys, relationships in the 6th grade are more challenging than for girls. Compared to 5th grade, it is harder for boys to get along with other kids. Further, boys feel more isolated, like they don't fit in as much with other kids, and are teased more by other kids at school.

What is harder for middle school girls? For Champaign 6th grade girls, getting along with parents is a little harder than it is for boys. Compared to 5th grade, in 6th grade, girls tend to have more arguments with parents. They feel that their parents give them less independence than they would like and that their parents hassle them a lot more.

So, many aspects of kids' lives may become harder as they start middle school and approach adolescence. Although both boys and girls think school gets tougher, boys and girls differ in the other difficulties they experience.

PROJECT STAFF:

MELISSA CALDWELL

ALYSSA CLARK

COLLEEN CONLEY

HEIDI GAZELLE

SHAMALA KUMAR

KADEE KURLAKOWSKY

KAREN RUDOLPH, Ph.D.
DIRECTOR

THE CHALLENGES OF MIDDLE SCHOOL

Why do some adolescents thrive when they encounter new experiences and challenges in middle school but other adolescents struggle to fit into the new environment? One goal of the Middle School Transition Project is to understand what determines how adolescents adjust to the experiences of middle school.

We asked adolescents about their sense of mastery over different areas of their lives, such as their ability to do well in school or to make new friends if they tried, and about how important it was to them to succeed in school and with their peers. We also asked them about stressful experiences that they were encountering outside of school, such as moving to a new house or experiencing financial difficulties in the family.

...adolescents who believed that they did not have much influence over their success in school or in their peer relationships became depressed when they experienced a transition into middle school

We found that adolescents who believed that they did not have much influence over their success in school or in their peer relationships became depressed when they experienced a transition into middle school, but adolescents who felt a sense of mastery did not become depressed. Because middle school places higher demands on adolescents for independence and self-direction than elementary school, adolescents who believed that they could not succeed no matter how hard they tried were overwhelmed by these new expectations. We also found that adolescents who placed low importance on academic success and who placed a lot of importance on popularity were

more likely to become depressed after the transition. Adolescents who were experiencing stressful circumstances outside of school also had more difficulty adjusting to the transition than those who were in stable environments.

Given all of the changes that adolescents experience during this time, it is very important for them to feel effective in achieving their goals.

We then asked why adolescents' beliefs and their environments affected their emotions during the transition to middle school. We found that adolescents who had a low sense of mastery, who were not very invested in academic success, and who had high levels of stress in their lives were less persistent when they were faced with challenges at school. Because they were less engaged at school and gave up more easily, they had more problems in their schoolwork and in getting along with their classmates. Academic problems and difficulties with their classmates made them more likely to feel sad and hopeless during this stressful transition.

So what can parents and educators do to help adolescents avoid these problems during the transition period? Given all of the changes that adolescents experience during this time, it is very important for them to feel effective in achieving their goals. Parents can help adolescents to develop a sense of effectiveness by encouraging them to be independent, while also providing support when it is needed. Suggesting that adolescents try to solve problems on their own can convey a message that parents feel

confident about their children's abilities, and that it is OK to fail. Parents' attitudes toward school can also affect adolescents' motivation and investment in doing well.

...recognizing and addressing problems early on can help prevent students from disengaging from school and experiencing failures that lead them to feel even less motivated.

Teachers can help students to feel a sense of control if they provide opportunities for decision-making in the classroom and provide a supportive environment that recognizes the need for developing adolescents to gain more independence. Control over even small decisions can go a long way in making adolescents feel like they have some input into what happens to them at home and at school. It is also important for parents and teachers to realize that adolescents will need extra support at school when they are experiencing changes in other areas of their lives. Finally, recognizing and addressing problems early on can help prevent students from disengaging from school and experiencing failures that lead them to feel even less motivated.



WHAT DO KIDS CARE ABOUT?



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.

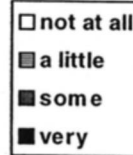
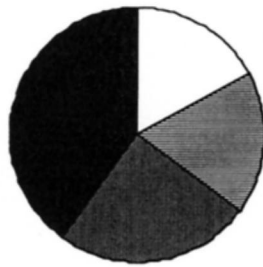
If you have any questions about the project, please do not hesitate to contact us by mail or phone:

Family Studies Lab at the
University of Illinois
Department of Psychology
603 East Daniel Street
Champaign, IL 61820
(217) 244-9385

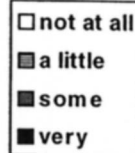
Thank you for your participation! This research would not be possible without your help. We appreciate your contribution to our understanding of adolescence.

--Family Studies Lab

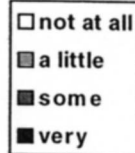
How important is it to feel challenged by your schoolwork ?



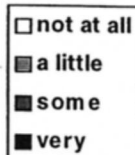
How important is it to learn interesting things in school?



How important is it to get to know fun and interesting kids?



How important is it to learn how to be a good friend?



In order to understand the thoughts and experiences of Champaign students, we asked 5th and 6th graders to tell us what was most important to them. Is receiving good grades important, or are students more interested in being challenged? Are students overly concerned with what other kids think about them or with improving established friendships?

Getting the grade. Champaign students definitely value receiving high grades in their classes. Ninety percent of the students identify getting good grades as really important. It also appears that *what* kids learn in their classes is important to them. Even though less than half of the kids think that being challenged by their schoolwork is important, two-thirds still want to learn interesting things in school.

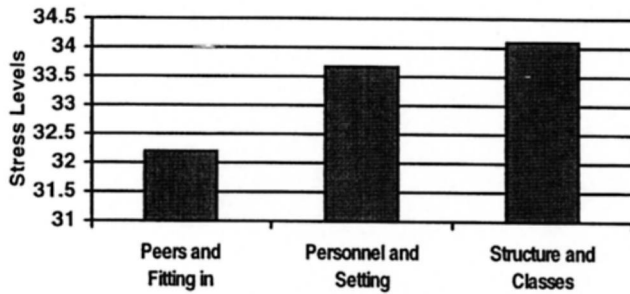
Friends and other kids. As kids approach adolescence, they become increasingly focused on their peer relationships. Adolescents tend to spend more time with peers than they did when they were younger, and they also depend more on peers and friends for support. As kids start to think more about peers, and perhaps worry more about how well they fit in with peers, you might expect them to be very concerned with their own popularity. However, having other kids think of them as popular is not as important to Champaign students as getting to know fun and interesting kids. So, it seems that having good relationships with peers, rather than being the "popular" kid, is what really matters to most 5th and 6th graders. In addition to getting to know fun and interesting kids, students value learning how to be a good friend. This suggests that students place more value on the qualities of their friends, as well as on the quality of their relationships with friends, than on their own status in the peer group.

SCHOOL HASSLES

As children progress from elementary to middle school, they are faced with numerous academic and school-related challenges. Such challenges may be related to aspects intrinsic to the school setting, structure, classes, the child's relationships with school personnel and peers, or self-image at school.

Last spring, participating children from Champaign area schools provided us with information concerning their experiences with school challenges or hassles.

An examination of the various responses suggested that certain aspects of school may be perceived as more stressful than others. Here's a look at the kinds of stress that children experience in school:



Within the three categories above, certain hassles were identified as being especially stressful.

- ◆ For the first category, peers and fitting in, concerns with peer acceptance were identified as one of the greatest sources of stress.

- ◆ In the second category, adjusting to the expectations of teachers regarding academic performance and behavior was seen as the most difficult.

- ◆ Finally, regarding school structure and classes, increased difficulty of course material and the changes in class scheduling (e.g., tardiness resulting from moving between classes) were perceived as stressful.

Knowing what are significant sources of stress for children as they undergo a school transition can help adults be more sensitive and helpful in these areas. It may not be possible or even desirable to change certain aspects of the school experience (e.g., level of difficulty of classwork). However, interventions may be developed to help children better adapt to the personal and scholastic rigors of gaining an education. For example, prior to the transition, it may be beneficial if children are exposed to the middle school environment and the different expectations they may face, either through participation in classes or activities in the middle school or through the dispensing of information concerning what they should expect in middle school.

The information provided may be useful for developing programs or policies to address the stress of elementary and middle school. The children are the "voices" and listening to them may help us to provide an educationally conducive school environment.



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: Transition to Adolescence Project

c/o Family Studies Lab at the University of Illinois

Department of Psychology

603 East Daniel Street

Champaign, IL 61820.

(Please print) Child's Name: _____

Your Name: _____

New Address: _____

New Phone Number: _____