Middle School 101: Helping Your Child Make a Smooth Transition

By Krystyann Krywko. Ed.D.

Middle school has a bad reputation. If you browse the young adult section at your local bookstore or library, you will see titles such as *Middle School is Worse Than Meatloaf: A Year Told Through Stuff* by Jennifer L. Holm, *Middle School: The Worst Years of My Life* by James Patterson, and *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kenney, among others. These books make it sound like middle school is a frightening battlefield that few children have any chance of surviving.

The reality is that middle school arrives at a time when your child is going through rapid physical, social, emotional and cognitive (brain) changes. For many children it means they are leaving their cozy elementary school environment and heading to a larger middle school that is often comprised of two or more elementary schools coming together. Homework and academic demands increase. Extracurricular activities also become more serious as club/travel teams and school sports begin to fill the picture. Children become more self-aware and self-conscious and they just want to fit in. Middle school is also a time when parents begin to let go a little bit and allow their child to have some more independence.

Research findings suggest at least a moderate level of concern by most children and their parents regarding various issues associated with middle school transitions. These concerns ranged from anxiety about how they were going to open their lockers to how they would deal with older students (Bailey, Giles, & Rogers, 2015).
Based on this research, Bailey and colleagues (2015) identified **three separate areas** where students needed extra support to help transition successfully to middle school: **social, academic and organizational**.

The Middle School Social Scene

The middle school social scene can be overwhelming. Many school transition programs focus primarily on academic and procedural issues that are associated with navigating middle school, but it is often the social piece that increases anxiety in most students.
Some of the biggest concerns come from shifting social groups. As your child and his friends change, so do their social groups. Cliques can form easily, and the friendships that your child had in elementary school can change due to different interests and the needs of each child involved. Your child might find it overwhelming at times as he tries to manage old friendships, and also find room for new friends. Talk to your child about his changing friendships. Let them know it is normal for friends to come and go in their life. Just make sure that there are still some other children that he feels a connection with.

"In reality, our daughter transitioned pretty well," recalls Janet DesGeorges, mother of Sara, who is now 23 years old and wears bilateral hearing aids, "but her social life did experience a shift. At first, she was not as confident in her ability to self-advocate, and she didn't really 'put herself out there' socially in new situations. It took her some time to feel comfortable in approaching her teachers with her needs, as well as meeting new friends."

Keeping that in mind, it's important for young adolescents to sense they belong to a group in which they feel valued and useful (Jackson & Davis, 2000). "One way to help your child find a group is to encourage them to sign up for at least one team or club," says Dana Selznick, an itinerant teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in New York City. "Most middle schools have a variety of clubs based around different interests, and they tend to meet in smaller groups so communication is easier."

The Noise Factor

A great deal of middle school socializing takes place in common areas - the hallways and the cafeteria become places where plans are made, homework is discussed and laughs are shared. This can be difficult for students with hearing

loss simply because of the larger space, increased noise and fast-paced conversation.

"Places like the hallway and the cafeteria are some of the most overwhelming places for students with hearing loss," says Suzanne Raschke, teacher consultant for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students in Midland County, Michigan. "There are typically more students, larger hallways and more commotion, so it can be difficult for students to socialize, locate their next class, and pass off an FM transmitter without anyone noticing."

One way to help your child thrive during these unstructured times is to have them connect to a buddy that can help them in the hallway and be able to repeat information they missed in the hallway or during lunch. "Sometimes I miss what my friends are going to do after lunch," says Henry, an eighth grade student, "so my friend Ben makes sure that I know where they decide to play at recess so I can meet them."

Becoming a Skilled Navigator

One way to help your child be successful at dealing with "transition trauma" is to work on emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence can be nurtured, and you are most likely already helping your child to develop these skills at home. Emotional intelligence includes developing coping strategies, learning how to acquire and use information, work with others, and manage personal growth. Students with greater emotional intelligence skills are able to cope and adapt more easily, resulting in stronger abilities to succeed both academically and socially (Richardson, 2002).

"Our daughter had grown up with a lot of the same kids year to year, and we felt like we had a handle on her educational needs," says DesGeorges, "but she describes her entry to middle school as the first time she really faced other students who didn't know her, and thought of her as 'different,' leading to her own need to grow in her self-identity and confidence."

Adjusting to Academic Challenges

Along with a changing social scene comes an entirely new set of expectations in the classroom. Students need to develop relationships and decode what the classroom expectations are with numerous teachers. They are also expected to take responsibility for their own learning as classes are academically more rigorous and focus on performance rather than on tasks.

Reassess for Success

Your child's Individualized Program Plan (IPP) will follow him to middle school, but it is important to really think through what your child will need prior to them leaving elementary school. Your child's needs will most likely change once they hit middle school and there is a possibility that gaps may widen due to a more complex curricula or increased demand for skills such as more flexible thinking, greater working memory, and the need to plan and prioritize school work.

"The transition meeting is one of the most important meetings that your child will have," says Raschke. "It's really about taking the time to figure out what accommodations your child will need in the classroom. And in some cases, even to overthink their needs just to make sure that no gaps arise in services and that the schools and teachers are prepared."

Who's in Charge?

Along with increased independence come increased responsibilities. No matter how skilled an advocate you have become for your child, middle school is the time when your child needs to begin to advocate for himself.

At this age your child should know what his IPP goals are and should be in attendance at the IPP transition meeting. That way they can begin to own their IPP goals and to understand why certain supports are needed. "Kids always think they know what they need and are fine without the supports," says Kristina English, Ph.D., professor of speech-language pathology and audiology at the

University of Akron, "but there is a need to talk through concerns and your child at this age is able to have some more adult conversations about their needs."

"I think the most important thing for me as Sara's mom," says DesGeorges, "was to really listen to what Sara was saying about her accessibility - whether I really agreed with it or not, and then to respect her right to make decisions. Of course, we had some conditions on those decisions, such as if she didn't want to use the FM we would respect that decision as long as her grades didn't fall, but once that happened then we revisited her needs."

Filling in the Blanks About Your Needs

Meeting with the new team of teachers is also important, and the earlier your child is able to do this the better. Nicole Turano, mother to Sam, a 14-year-old who wears bilateral cochlear implants, said that "Sam tells them things from his perspective, what's helpful for him and what they need to know. This really helps to demystify what kids with hearing loss are like and that not all kids with hearing loss are the same."
Another way to have your child become more responsible for his needs is to have him write a letter or put together a presentation for the new middle school staff before the start of the year. "I have my transitioning students write the information they feel is important for their new teachers to know," says Raschke, "what helps them access the curriculum and what their needs are. I really feel they are ready to transition when they are confident in their self-knowledge and self-advocacy.

Classroom Communication

Even though parents are encouraged to be more hands-off in middle school, you know your child's unique challenges, and it is important to keep that in mind when communicating with classroom teachers. Take the time to meet with the teaching team early in the year. It's important to know all your child's teachers, not only their homeroom teacher. This way when you have concerns about your child you can give the appropriate teacher a heads up.

"There is stuff you can prepare for and then there is the stuff that you just need to figure out on the fly," says Turano. "But one thing I always do, because my son has so many teachers, is that I put together a two-page rundown about his IPP and his needs. I add my own comments about what the goals and accommodations mean, and Sam adds some ideas about what helps him to be more successful in the classroom."

A New Level of Organization

When you think of all the new things your child has to deal with - juggling classrooms, subject materials and different teacher personalities, following rules, navigating around a new building, figuring out new procedures, and learning how to open and use a locker - it's no wonder students can become overwhelmed.

One of the best things to do with your child before they transition to middle school is to have lots of discussions about how he/she is going to make the transition and to begin working on how to come up with a strategy.

Most schools have visits for the new students so they are able to see the building layout, where their classes might be, where their lockers are, etc. Having an idea of the physical space of the school is important to coming up with a strategy, and can also help reduce anxiety as your child is able to get a better sense of what they need to do and where they need to go.

Designate a Base Camp

Your child will be moving between classes so it is important to establish some sort of base camp where the FM, extra batteries, and someone who knows how to troubleshoot will be located. It can also be helpful; to have someone in the building who your child can go to when he is overwhelmed with noise in the cafeteria, or is worn out from listening.

"After a couple of weeks of having the FM be in the wrong classroom for my son, we finally decided to keep it in the nurse's office," says Turano, "it's located

right by the front door, so it's the first place he passes in the morning and the last place on the way out."

The Great FM Hand-Off

Having multiple teachers means that there may be multiple handoffs of the FM transmitter. This can be one of the most anxiety producing parts of transitioning to middle school. Some students are completely comfortable with carrying the transmitter out in the open and don't make a big deal of passing it to the teacher. Others feel embarrassed and clip it to the cover of their binder and pass it to the teacher when no one is looking. Talk to your child about what his comfort level might be and help him make a plan. Communicate the plan to all of your child's teachers so they know what to expect and can support your child's decisions.

The transition to middle school can be difficult, but it doesn't have to be. When you take the time to prepare your child, the transition should be a natural next step for him. Part of making the transition to middle school is understanding that while your child can't control his diagnosis, he can "grow" the courage to live with it. And it does take courage to be the one to walk into a new room and hand the teacher the FM system, or to ask another student for help taking notes, but that's what needs to be done. "The middle school transition is really about beginning to relinquish some control as a parent," says DesGeorges, "but it's also about keeping your integrity as a parent and keeping your child on the right path in the classroom and with their friends."

References

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- See more at: http://www.agbell.org/VoltaVoices/Jul-Sep2015/MiddleSchool101/#sthash.ns3Zg0Jq.dpuf

Krystyann Krywko, Ed.D. is an award-winning education writer and researcher, specializing in hearing loss and how it affects children and families. Both she and her son were diagnosed with hearing loss one year apart. She loves to engage with parents and educators in order to dispel misunderstandings about hearing loss and to focus on the strengths of children who are deaf and hard of hearing. She is the founder of Kids with Hearing Loss (www.kidswithhearingloss.org)— an initiative to provide families a place from where they can move forward with strength.