



## Bigger School, Big Adjustment

### *Stepping Into Junior High Can Be A Struggle For Early Adolescents*

**M**aking the move from elementary school to junior high couldn't come at a tougher time for most children. Just as the physical, emotional and social changes of early adolescence begin to kick in, they find themselves in a school environment radically different than what they're used to.

The good news is most children pass through this tumultuous stage without experiencing great stress or serious problems. But for others, it marks the beginning of a downward spiral toward academic failure, school drop-out, and other serious problems.

Depending on the ethnic group, between 15% and 30% of US adolescents drop out before completing high school. Adolescents have the highest arrest rate of any age group and an increasing number of them report regular use of alcohol or other drugs.<sup>1</sup> Among early adolescents, declines in grades, self-esteem, and motivation are commonly seen.

Research suggests the transition to junior high is not a benign factor. How well the school setting fits the needs of early adolescents plays an influential role in their school career and the lives they will later lead.

Children enter junior high at a time of heightened self-focus. Their desire for autonomy and self-determination is strong. Their ability to use higher level cognitive strategies is rising. Relationships with their peers become especially important. And they need guiding relationships with adults outside the

home, such as teachers.

#### **Early Adolescence**

The transition to junior high will likely be a rocky one if kids enter a school that poorly accommodates the changes going on in their lives. Unfortunately, several typical characteristics of junior high conflict with the wants and needs of early adolescents.

- **Teachers exert greater control.** Early adolescents seek autonomy. But when they move into junior high, they often find teachers who tend to place greater emphasis on control and discipline.
- **Student-teacher relationships are less personal.** Early adolescents typically see their relationships with junior high teachers as less personal and less positive than the relationships they enjoyed with their teachers in grade school.
- **Less small-group attention.** Early adolescents find changes in the way they are taught in junior high as well. Changes include whole-class organization, between classroom ability grouping, and public evaluation of their work. All tend to increase social comparison, concerns about being evaluated, and competitiveness.
- **Work requires lower level skills.** At a time when their ability to use higher level cognitive skills is increasing, first-year junior high students may get work that requires skill levels lower than those required in grade school. One study of junior high science classes, for example, found

only a small share of the work required higher creative or expressive skills. In many cases, students simply copied answers from blackboards or textbooks onto worksheets.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Teachers & Students**

Teachers play a key role in how well early adolescents adapt to junior high. But those relationships often weaken when students enter junior high, where they tend to see their new teachers as less warm and supportive than those they had in grade school.

In many ways, the odds are stacked against students forming a cozy bond with their junior high teachers like those they enjoyed in grade school. For one thing, the size and structure of a junior high and middle school works against it. Asking junior high teachers to teach several different groups of kids a day reduces their opportunities to develop close relationships with each and every one of their students. In fact, several sources suggest that many of the problems in junior high result, at least in part, from the size and bureaucratic nature of the school as an institution.

Nevertheless, how students view their relationship with a teacher can influence their interest in the subject taught. Junior high mathematics teachers, for example, were viewed as less friendly and supportive than grade school teachers when rated by students who had been taught by both. In turn, the junior high teachers expressed less trust in the students than did the sixth

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grade teachers who had them a year earlier.<sup>3</sup> Students who had junior high math teachers they viewed as less supportive showed a decline in the value they attached to math. Those who moved into the classrooms of teachers they viewed as more supportive tended to value math more highly.

**Other Influences**

Parents also play a role in how well their children adjust. Excessive parent control is associated with lower student motivation and self-esteem following transition to junior high. It is also linked to higher levels of misconduct and a tendency to rely more on peers for support.

Developmental maturity may also color the way students perceive their junior high experience. More physically mature female students, for example, tend to express a greater desire to participate in classroom decision-making than those who are less physically mature. They are also more likely to feel they aren't given sufficient decision-making opportunities in junior high.<sup>4</sup>

The timing of the move out of elementary school also appears to be a factor. Seventh graders who enter a junior high that houses grades 7-9 tend to experience more problematic changes than those who remain in a K-8 school structure that allows them to postpone the transition.<sup>5</sup>

Entering a junior high or middle-school is a trying time for most children and a precarious turning point for others, who, without intervention, can grow disaffected and alienated from learning — a path they may follow into adulthood.

**Easing the Transition**

Although many characteristics of junior high are at odds with the needs of early adolescents, there are steps some schools take that help students make the adjustment.

Successful middle and junior high schools have positive and developmentally appropriate learning environments. Teachers feel better about their abilities to teach, students enjoy opportunities to participate in classroom decisions, and there are strong relationships between students and teachers.

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, in a 1989 report, suggests smaller communities for learning, empowering teachers and administrators to have more responsibility over their programs, and using team and cooperative learning.

Empowering teachers and using smaller learning communities has been found to result in teachers feeling more positive about the effectiveness of their teaching. Cooperative learning practices have shown some success in improving student achievement. In this approach, students of mixed ability work on assignments everyone is required to master. The practice enhances achievement by encouraging students to teach

and learn from each other rather than compete.

Prevention programs focused on teaching students to deal with common stresses also help ease the difficulties of school transition. Stressful situations reported by junior high students include conflict with teachers, higher teacher expectations, peer pressure, dating, and heavier homework loads.

**Coping Skills**

Early adolescents tend to cope better when they use "approach" rather than "avoidance" strategies. Approach strategies, such as seeking support to solve a problem, are linked to positive outcomes, such as higher self-concept.

Those who use avoidance strategies — thoughts or behaviors serve to avoid a problem or its emotional impact — risk missing opportunities to develop coping resources, such as a social network. Such strategies make it more difficult for students to adjust to the junior high or middle school they've just moved into.

**references**

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