

# Moving on up:

Transition from Elementary to Middle to High  
School

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## Why Focus on the Transition to Middle School?

- Students' perceptions of the quality of life declines as they move into middle school
- Most school programming focuses heavily on academics and regulations, rather than social and emotional needs
- A Rite of Passage
- Often when children are first brought to mental health services
  - Especially anxiety (abilities, appearances, embarrassment, safety, sexuality)
- Older coping strategies may not be enough
- Often first experiences/exposure to substance use and risk taking/rule breaking
- Perfect storm of biology, academics, emotions, socialization

## Even more reasons...

- Research has shown a decline in self esteem, especially in girls
- We see a 'dumbing down' of children, especially girls
- Natural striving for independence and peer connection, coupled with a fear of embarrassment
- May be the first significant family 'growing pains'
- Often when it is expected that 'everyone' has a phone and is on social media
- Additional challenges for those with social/emotional/academic special needs

# Why Focus on Transitions to High School?

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- Attendance and grades tend to slip as kids enter high school, especially hard for those labeled gifted in MS
- There is often an even greater need for friendships and increased expectation of dating
- Negative self views/self talk increases
- Increased intensity of competition and focus on college
- Increased independence expected
- More need for time management and organizational skills

# What are kids concerned about as they venture into middle school?

- What do my teachers expect of me?
- How will I find my classes? Open my locker?
- Managing ever changing friend groups and social expectations
- Managing extracurriculars
- Bigger school and more people
- Developmental changes
- What is everyone else doing and how do I compare?
- Work load (where did recess go?)
- Older students (no longer big fish in a small pond)
- Parental expectations
- Changing clothes for gym class
- Personal safety (rumors of bullying etc)
- New grading system
- Do I have what it takes (socially, academically, physically, emotionally)?
- Social media presence

# What are teens concerned about as they move onto high school?

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- Making new/more friends
- Dating
- Older students
- Getting lost in a larger school
- Parental expectations
- larger/longer range assignments
- Competition (social, academic, athletic etc)
- Expectations for college
- Standardized tests
- Appearance compared to others
- Driving

# Successful Transitions: from the kids' point of view

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- Know when you are starting to have trouble and know who to ask for help
- Stay in your lane: resist comparing grades/appearance/ability with others
- Limit and take breaks from social media
- Learn to recognize 'fake news'; use a critical eye when looking at things online
- Spend time with healthy people; do it face to face
- Force yourself to look for the good/positive; what are you grateful for?
- Identify your team
- Get involved in what you're interested in or enjoy; you're more than a resume
- Nervous is normal; sometimes nervous is excitement
- It's ok to be a kid
- You need to make mistakes
- What is in your stress management toolbox?
- Keep perspective; this is a dot on your timeline

# Successful Transitions: from the adult point of view

- This will be a longer list! (but don't worry, you don't have to do it all at once)
- Parent/teacher overlap
- What is our goal? We want to build skills so they can thrive as adults in the world
- You can't (and shouldn't) fix everything
- Some anxiety is normal and necessary
- Help show them what the next school/next step will look like; what to expect
- Coordinate academics with guidance/teachers to appropriately place children.
- Involve the kids
- Remember the "whole" child as you look at transitions; see them as part of a 'system'
- Emphasize mastery and improvement, rather than relative ability and comparison
- Encourage effort, skill building, and problem solving; give choices when possible
- Where can you build a sense of community, belonging, and connection?
- Foster non-academic talents too
- Life skills build confidence and a sense of agency/ability to contribute
- Listen for red flags (physical complaints, sleep/eating changes, withdrawal)
- Pay attention to your own feelings; are you anxious? Does this bring up your teen years?
- Be physically and mentally present
- Keep in mind what is normal (even if we don't like it) at this age

# More tips for parents

- Listen (validate rather than fix)
- Take a consultant versus manager role (work together to problem solve)
- Be a role model (are you willing to do what you want your child to do? Try new things? Appropriate stress management? Emotional expression?)
- Share appropriately about your teen years; kids sometimes think we just turned out this way
- Allow failure
- Be honest with yourself about your child (are they struggling? Is this you or your child? Are they a good friend?)
- Find your community/team
- Teach your child to advocate for themselves
- Pick your battles (natural consequences)
- Acknowledge your family is changing
- Maintain your health

# The Practical Stuff

- Go visit the new school over summer; walk their schedule if it's high school
- Get a lock at home and practice
- Tape their schedule to the inside of a big binder
- Go over the school handbook and website with your child
- Teach your child to use a calendar/planner
- After the first week, discuss each class with your child; what does the teacher expect? How do they post assignments and notes? What do you need for class?
- Learn the school technology; how do they communicate and how do you stay in the loop?
- Teach your child to use the portal (Check together once a week with MS students; encourage your HS student to check weekly, while you do spot checks)
- Who is your child's guidance counselor? Both of you should know who they are and how they can help
- Help your child identify their team
- Are there older teens you can trust to be a buddy/mentor?
- Foster and role model good self care including sleep, eating, hydration, exercise
- Discuss sexuality and sexual activity openly
- Discuss safe choices with regard to risk taking
- Educate about risks of substances
- Technology: it's not all bad: learn it: monitor reasonably: teach them healthy use

# When you should be concerned and seek help

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- Lots of physical complaints such as frequent stomach aches, head aches
- School refusal, skipping classes
- Withdrawal more than typical
- Frequent meltdowns
- Self harm
- Dramatic changes in eating, sleeping, socializing, grades
- Breaking the law
- Repeatedly going off radar
- Putting self in harms way
- Signs of anxiety and depression that are significant
- Use of substances, sex, food as self medication
- Trust your gut
- Start with guidance counselor, physician, psychologist

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Locations in Warrington and Lafayette Hill