

Background: School Transition in the Early Years

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Students experience physical, psychological and social changes associated with development when transitioning from elementary school to middle school. A decrease in achievement as well as mental health issues, such as depression, can occur during these times of growth and transition. An increase worry and low self-esteem can be indicators of distress. Children can be protected and supported during this time by school, family, and peers.

“Students experience many changes in their school environment associated with the transition from elementary school to middle school or junior high school.”¹ For instance, primary schools help children to achieve goals, while in middle schools, teachers may be more focused on performance.² Internal and external developmental growth in children is also a reason transition can be difficult. This is especially true when children transition from elementary school to junior high because of significant physical, psychological and social changes that occur throughout adolescence. As a relatively direct result, there may be a significant decrease in achievement.³ This could precede more severe outcomes such as dropping out, school failure, and truancy. Once a major school transition has occurred, studies have found that these risks decrease which means the transition period is extremely crucial to the success of transition. Another sign of students struggling with transition is a decline in self-esteem. Because lower self-esteem may result academic

¹ Alspaugh, W. J. (1998). Achievement loss associated with the transition to middle school and high school. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 92(1). p.20.

² Midgley, C., Andeman, E., & Hicks, L., (1995). Differences between elementary and middle school teachers and students: *A goal theory approach*. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 15(1), 90-113.

³ Gutman, L. M., Midgley, C., (2000). The role of protective factors in supporting the academic achievement of poor African American students during the middle school Transition. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 29(2), 223-248.

disengagement which may lead to thoughts of dropout in high school, intervening during the junior high transition is a critical to avoid school failure and any emotional disorders.⁴ Furthermore, recent research exploring peer experience – which includes peer acceptance, number of mutual friends, and friendship quality - is also an important factor in predicting adjustment when transitioning from elementary school to middle school⁵.

To prevent these risk factors, family and school support serve as protective factors during school transition periods.⁶ In research focusing on prevention of mental health disorders and dropout rates of Mexican American adolescents the following were proven areas of intervention: adolescent coping skills, parenting skills intervention, and family strengthening intervention.⁷

⁴ Gonzales, N. A., Dumka, L. E., Deardorff, J., Carter, S. J., & McCray, A.,(2004). Preventing poor mental health and school dropout of Mexican American Adolescents following the transition to junior high school. *Journal of Adolescent Research*. 19(1), 113-131.

⁵ Kingery, J. N., Erdley, C., (2007). Peer experiences as predictors of adjustment across the middle school transition. *Education and Treatment of Children*. 30(2), 73-88

⁶ Gutman, L. M., Midgley. C., (2000). The role of protective factors in supporting the academic achievement of poor African American students during the middle school Transition. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 29(2), 223-248

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