

# *Psych Savvy*

## *ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT*

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### **Helping Middle School Students Make the Transition into High School**

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Starting high school is a major rite of passage for adolescents. Young adolescents entering high school look forward to having more choices and making new and more friends, though changing schools and especially moving to a large school can be an academic and social risk factor.

Transitioning students are concerned about being picked on and teased by older students, having harder work, making lower grades, and getting lost in a larger, unfamiliar school. The social and emotional fears that incoming freshmen deal with can directly impact their academic performance. Research suggests that many students experience a decline in grades and attendance; they view themselves more negatively and experience an increased need for friendships; and by the end of 10th grade, as many as 6% drop out of school. Risk factors include: social status change; age/developmental differences; environmental conditions such as building and student-body size.

Ninth-graders face a big step down in social status, going from the top of the heap in their previous school to the lowest rung in high school. They arrive as the new kids, the young ones, the ones who don't know what's what and who's who.

The developmental divide between ninth-graders, who could be as young as 14, and upperclassmen, who could be over 18, can be extreme. There's a wide range of social development in high school. Exceptionally bright ninth-graders can end up in classes with much older teens and may be unprepared socially.

The difference in size of your child's old and new schools can have a big impact on their transition. Kids from smaller school districts may face a kind of culture shock in large, regional high schools. Larger class sizes, more students, a bigger campus, and teaching styles more focused on the subject matter than the needs of individual students can be difficult for incoming freshmen.

The good news is that parents and schools can help make the transition easier.

Research supports positive effects of high school sponsored middle school to high school transition programs. A high school transition program may include a variety of activities that (1) provide students and parents with information about the new school, (2) provide students with social support during the transition, and (3) bring middle school and high school personnel together to learn about one another's curriculum and requirements.

Some of the ways students can learn about high school include: visiting the high school in the spring, perhaps to "shadow" a high school student; attending a presentation by a high school student or panel of students; visiting the high school; attending a fall orientation assembly (preferably before school starts); and discussing high school regulations and procedures with eighth-grade teachers and counselors.

In addition to face-to-face activities, another possible source of information is the Internet. High school students might, either as a class or club project, set up a Web page that would provide incoming students information on different high school activities and clubs and offer them an opportunity to get answers to any questions they may have from the "experts."

When parents are involved in their student's transition to high school, they tend to stay involved in their child's school experiences. Research shows that when parents are involved in their child's high school experiences students have higher achievement, are better adjusted, and are less likely to drop out of school.

The move from middle to high school is one of those times when your child needs you most, but is often too embarrassed to ask for support. Keep the lines of communication open with your child throughout this period. It's important to balance a respect for your child's desire for independence with a very real need to stay involved in their life and education. Kids want their parents involved; they just want them to be involved in a different way. For example, your teen may not mind if you act as a chaperone on a school trip, as long as you ride on a different bus than they do.

Parents need to be actively involved in the decisions their eighth-graders are asked to make about classes they will take in ninth grade, and understand the long-term effects of the course decisions. Parent involvement can also take a number of forms at home, such as spending time with your child and getting to know his or her friends. Suggest that they invite their friends over to watch movies or hang out. As the kids drift in and out of the kitchen for snacks, take the opportunity to ask your child's friends casual, non-intrusive questions to get a sense of who they are and to send your child the message that you care.

Parents may help select extra-curricular activities, and provide vital support for such activities through daily transportation, payment of fees, required physicals, and other related participation issues.

Adapted from these web sites: [familyeducation.com/experts/advice/html](http://familyeducation.com/experts/advice/html)

Excerpted from "School Transitions: Middle School to High School," published in [National PTA®'s \*Our Children\*](#) magazine.

[The PTA Connection](#) on FamilyEducation Network