

After the Elementary Schools Years, Now What?

By Dr. Sheryl Kaufman

Educational Journeys LLC

(843)342 - 9769/ (973) 714 - 4446

It's time for your son/daughter to start middle school and your feeling worried and scared, as well as wondering how your child is going to survive in a new and different environment. You're not alone. Middle school creates many challenges for the typical student as well.

According to Scales (1991), early adolescence has seven areas that require attention:

1. Positive social interaction with adults and peers
2. Creative expression
3. Competence and achievement
3. Structure and clear limits
4. Physical activity
5. Meaningful participation in families and school
6. Communities, opportunities for self-determination

Educators and parents facing middle school years should view middle school as a rewarding and growing time. Your child will acquire life skills and knowledge, gain friendships, and most of all achieve increased independence. Schools and parents need to work together to design strong, supportive programs that allow for individual preferences and abilities.

Teachers and parents need to collaborate in designing programs that can challenge children with autism/special needs to enhance skills they already have, and develop skills they lack.

Before your child enters into the middle school environment make sure:

- Administrators should make a point of knowing your child. Take time to visit the school before the year begins and meet the principal. A personal connection is a must.
- Make sure the staff understands autism or the special needs your child has.
- Create a short list of your child's strengths/weakness
- Parents/professionals should create a portfolio (I.E.P., behavioral plan, medical history, motivators, likes and dislikes, family tree with pictures, goals and vision of family members, sample of work from past year, pictures, etc.)
- Teachers should understand that no two students with special needs are the same, and what works for one student may not work for the other. More important is that the staff take the time to read the portfolio and ask many questions.
- Classroom professionals may want to provide incoming parents of middle school children a background of themselves.

Preparing the Family

- Familiarize parents and the child with their new school with a map, student handbook, lunch menus, yearbooks, etc.

- Provide a list and description of school activities.
- Introduce or contact parent support groups such as PTA/PTO
- Know how parental communication will take place (notebook, phone calls, email, meetings)
- Make sure parent's know their case worker or primary contact, and help them establish contacts.

Preparing Your Child

- Some children have sensitivity to sound. Have the bells go off (don't forget to prep him/her) when he comes to visit as well as teaching what the fire alarm sounds like.
- Practice walking through the child's schedule or make a video pointing out important areas, making sure he knows his safe place, bus area, homeroom, bathrooms cafeteria, gym, and nurse.
- If lockers are used, give him time to practice opening and closing the locker. If needed, use a lock with a key as a modification for combination.
- Review rules and make sure he understands. Teach this to him on a one on one basis, being sensitive to his learning style. Processing is really important.
- Review the yearbook, so he sees faculty members and school activities.
- Practice going to a calm or quiet place (safe place), walking through the route he will take.
- Make sure he understands each teacher has different rules and procedures.
- Explain change and flexibility to your child. Write a list of things he can do to help him deal with the changes he will be experiencing.
- Assistive technology such as a tape recorder can be helpful for documenting homework. A laptop computer, such as an alpha smart can assist with poor writing skills, (Sayers, 2006). An I-pad can help with communication and social skills.
- Obtain books and other resources about middle school issues and social rules (Sayers, 2006)

Administration and Staff Preparation

- Communicate to staff as soon as possible that they will be receiving a student with autism/special needs.
- Know how staff will be prepared, supported, and informed.
- Give staff resources that include names of videos, books, and websites about autism/special needs, and sensory intergration
- Choose an older student to be a mentor and buddy to help create socialization and peer interaction.
- Help staff with adaptations/modifications for the first few week (takes time).
- Advise staff that they will need to closely monitor comprehension of material, since many students with autism excel at memorizing information without processing or understanding it.
- Meet often as a group/support team to proactively and quickly solve problems.
- Know and discuss parental expectations regarding homework, completing assignments, and their child.

- Decide the best method for quick and reliable communication between parents and school personnel

Hints for teachers in setting up your Classroom:

Keep it structured

Use visuals (even if you know they know what is happening, A picture says a thousand words)

Schedules help students understand what is happening next and ease transition (break them down into steps).

Reduce distractions

Remember it's not personal

Transitions are tough

Remember when dealing with behavior look at your actions first.

Establish independence slowly. Each child is different and moves at their own pace.

Rewards before consequences

Teach with lists

Creative teaching, think out of the box

Don't sweat the small stuff

Remember the final goal is for your student to be happy, successful, and function independently in today's society.

Strategies for parents to think about:

- Organization is key. Ask the school if he can use one spiral notebook with dividers. Also make there are pockets included to keep assignments/notes for parents,etc. and one pocket for things that go to school. On the front of the notebook(clear cover), keep a copy of his schedule so it is visible and can be referred to as needed. Bring your child shopping for school supplies. Once again make him part of the process. Give him choices when selecting items. He needs to feel in control.
- Individualize his schedule. You may need to color code each class and have one schedule for each day. Know his schedule ahead of time. For some students you may need to put when he takes bathroom breaks and goes to his locker.
- Have an extra set of books at home for homework.
- Have monthly meetings at the start of the school year. Communication is extremely important.
- Start creating more independence at home. Remember middle school years are growing years and growing years can be painful but exciting.
- Middle school offers many opportunities and benefits for your child. Discuss or share the many types of organizations and clubs they may be able to join.

- Identify what your child likes and provide motivators for desired behaviors.
- Socialization can be tough. See what the school offers to help your child be included.

One last thought:

Celebrate each small step as you watch your child gain new skills.

References and resources:

Sayers, B. (2006). transitioning Into Middle School. Bellaonline Autism spectrum disorders Site. (Available at <http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art48157.asp>)

Vicker, B. Indiana Resource Center for Autism