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Thank you for your request to our REL Reference Desk regarding problems associated with students transitioning to middle school and strategies to support this transition. Ask A REL is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the ten regional educational laboratories (REL) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. It provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations on research based education questions.

The information below represents the most rigorous research available. Researchers consider the type of methodology and give priority to research reports that employ well described and thorough methods. The resources were also selected based on the date of the publication with a preference for research from the last ten years. Additional criteria for inclusion include the source and funder of the resource.

**Question:** *What are the common problems associated with school transitions for 5th graders and what are some strategies to aid with these problems?*

**Key words and search strings used in the search:** *helping students transition to middle school; transition to middle school; assisting students AND transition AND elementary school to middle school; challenges in transition from grade 5 to grade 6*

**Search databases and websites:**

1. ERIC: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/>
2. JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/action/showAdvancedSearch>
3. Google Scholar: [www.google.com/scholar](http://www.google.com/scholar)
4. Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Resources: <http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/>
5. What Works Clearinghouse: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>

**Citations Retrieved: (NOTE: Abstracts and executive summaries are copied directly from the reports when possible to ensure accuracy):**

Akos, P. (2006). Extracurricular participation and the transition to middle school. *RMLE Online: Research in Middle Level Education*, 29(9), 1-9. Retrieved from: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ804106.pdf>

**Abstract/Summary:** Research demonstrates a host of negative student outcomes associated with the transition to middle school. As school personnel seek to connect students to the new school, extracurricular participation, in particular, has the potential to influence student belonging and

promote positive academic and psychosocial outcomes. Data from this investigation reveals that participation in multiple extracurricular activities relates to academic achievement and school connectedness. Implications for transition and extracurricular programming are included.

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Akos, P., Rose, R. A., & Orthner, D. (2015). Sociodemographic moderators of middle school transition effects on academic achievement. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 35(2), 170-198. doi: 10.1177/0272431614529367

**Abstract/Summary:** The academic impact of the transition from elementary to middle school has significant consequences for many early adolescents. This study examines academic growth across the transition, as well as sociodemographic moderators. Rather than defining the transition effect as a decline in student achievement between fifth and sixth grade, these data demonstrate the transition effect as an interruption in students' growth in achievement during this interval. Results confirm larger interruptions for vulnerable students (e.g., low income, special education) despite closing the gap effect over the third- to eighth-grade interval.

Duchesne, S. & Ratelle, C. (2010). Parental behaviors and adolescents' achievement goals at the beginning of middle school: Emotional problems as potential mediators. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(2), 497-507. doi: 10.1037/a0019320

**Abstract/Summary:** Recent literature on the determinants of academic motivation has shown that parenting and emotions are central elements in understanding students' achievement goals. The authors of this study set out to examine the predictive relationship between parental behaviors during the last year of elementary school and adolescents' achievement goals at the end of their first year of middle school. Manifestations of anxiety and depression in Grade 6 were examined as explanatory mechanisms for this relationship. A total of 498 early adolescents participated in the study. The results of structural equation modeling analyses demonstrated that parental involvement predicted mastery goals, whereas parental control predicted performance goals among these adolescents. This relationship was mediated by the adolescents' symptoms of anxiety. These results underscore the need for educators and clinicians to consider parental behaviors and emotional problems among elementary school students when seeking to understand the behaviors and learning strategies adopted by these students in middle school. (Contains 2 tables, 1 figure, and 1 footnote.)

Kingery, J. N., Erdley, C. A., & Marshall, K. C. (2011). Peer acceptance and friendship as predictors of early adolescents' adjustment across the middle school transition. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 57(3), 215-243. Retrieved from:  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23098045.pdf>

**Abstract/Summary:** This study examines several aspects of adolescents' pre-transition peer relationships as predictors of their adjustment to middle school. Participants were 365 students (175 boys; 99% Caucasian) involved in the Time 1 (the spring of fifth grade) and Time 2 (the

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fall of sixth grade) assessments. Adolescents completed measures that assessed peer acceptance, number of friends, the quality of a specific mutual friendship, loneliness, depression, self-esteem, and involvement in school. Academic achievement and absentee data were obtained from student files. Regression analyses indicated that the pre-transition peer variables predicted post transition loneliness, self-esteem, school involvement, and academic achievement. The patterns of prediction varied slightly for each adjustment variable, with the most robust relationship being between peer acceptance and achievement. Results of repeated-measures MANOVAs indicated no differential changes in adjustment across time by gender. Implications for including a peer component in programs that prepare students for the middle school transition are discussed.

Lane, K. L., Oakes, W. P., Carter, E. W., & Messenger, M. (2015). Examining behavioral risk and academic performance for students transitioning from elementary to middle school. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 17(1), 39-49.  
doi: 10.1177/1098300714524825

**Abstract/Summary:** We studied the transition from elementary to middle school for 74 fifth-grade students. Specifically, we examined how behavioral risk evident in the elementary years, as measured by the "Student Risk Screening Scale" (SRSS), impacts students transitioning from elementary to middle school. First, we examined how student risk status shifts as students transitioned from elementary to middle school, also exploring whether these shifts in risk were comparable with the shifts in risk occurring within the fifth-grade year. Second, we explored the degree to which these shifts in risk varied as a function of student gender, special education status, and initial behavioral performance. Although gender was not predictive of performance, there was a positive relation between special education status and initial behavioral risk when compared with risk evident during the sixth-grade year. Finally, we determined the extent to which risk at the end of elementary school was associated with academic and behavioral performance during the first year of middle school. Findings suggest a strong relation between grade point average (GPA) and course failures (CFs) with behavioral risk in sixth grade. As expected, there was a statistically significant, positive relation between CFs and sixth-grade SRSS scores and an inverse relation with GPA.

Parker, A. K. (2009). Elementary organization structures and young adolescents' self-concept and classroom environment perceptions across the transition to middle school. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 23(3), 325-339. doi: 10.1080/02568540909594664

**Abstract/Summary:** Transitions can be difficult at any age; however, the move from elementary school to middle school, coupled with the onset of adolescence, is often associated with a myriad of psychological and academic declines. One strategy currently used to "ready" elementary students for middle school is a departmentalized organizational structure. The

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purpose of this study was to investigate young adolescents' self-concept and classroom environment perceptions as they transitioned from two different elementary organizational structures into one middle school. Data were collected from 125 fifth-grade students who participated in a middle school transition program. Findings suggest that participants' perceptions of self-concept and classroom climate did not differ prior to or after the transition to middle school, based on the elementary organizational structure they experienced. However, time effects suggest that students' self-concept did significantly increase across the transition to middle school, while their perceptions of classroom climate were mixed.

Rudasill, K. M., Pössel, P. Winkeljohn Black, S., & Niehaus, K. (2014). Teacher support mediates concurrent and longitudinal associations between temperament and mild depressive symptoms in sixth grade. *Early Child Development and Care*, 184(6), 803-818. doi: 10.1080/03004430.2013.821610

**Abstract/Summary:** The combination of changes occurring at the transition to middle school may be a catalyst for the onset of depressive symptoms, yet teacher support at this transition is protective. Research points to certain temperamental traits as risk factors for developing depressive symptoms. This study examines student reports of teacher support and teacher reports of student-teacher relationship (STR) quality as mediators of associations between child temperament (i.e. negative emotionality at age 4½ and emotional reactivity in elementary grades) and depressive symptoms in sixth grade. Results indicate (a) negative emotionality predicted emotional reactivity and depressive symptoms; (b) emotional reactivity predicted depressive symptoms; (c) students' perceptions of teacher support (in grade 6) and teachers' perceptions of STR quality (in grades 4-6) predicted depressive symptoms; and (d) student-teacher conflict mediated associations between emotional reactivity and depressive symptoms. Findings point to the importance of teacher support and positive STRs during the transition to middle school.

Theriot, M. T., & Dupper, D. R. (2010). Student discipline problems and the transition from elementary to middle school. *Education and Urban Society*, 42(2), 205-222. doi: 10.1177/0013124509349583

**Abstract/Summary:** The transition from elementary to middle school is difficult for many students. However, the association between such transitions and changes in the types and frequencies of student discipline problems has not been adequately investigated. Using data from two school years, infractions and dispositions for all 5th-grade students ( $N = 4,196$ ) from one school district are followed from the final year of elementary school through the first year of middle school. Results show a substantial increase in reported student discipline problems and the use of in-school suspension in middle school. This increase is most dramatic for subjectively defined infractions like “class disturbance” and “failure to follow rules” compared to more

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concrete, objective infractions. Implications for educators and school administrators are discussed.

## **Referrals**

### **Federally Funded Resources:**

- Institute of Education Sciences (IES), public search engine available at: <http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/>
- What Works Clearinghouse: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>

### ***Disclaimer:***

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