

Going TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

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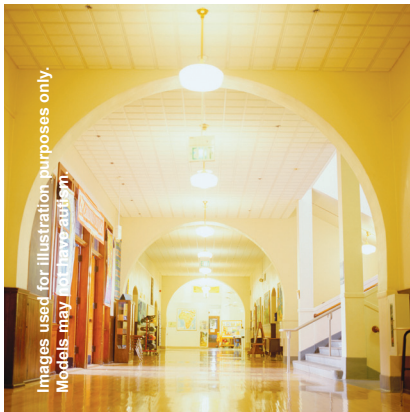
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STARTING MIDDLE SCHOOL IS STRESSFUL FOR ANY STUDENT, BUT THE PROCESS CAN BE EVEN MORE CHALLENGING FOR A STUDENT ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM (ASD) AND FOR HIS OR HER PARENTS.

Many things will be different. The school will probably be larger, the campus more confusing and the enrollment may be several times greater than in elementary school. The student likely will not know his or her new teachers and, in turn, the teachers might not know anything about the student. The aide, if one is needed and provided, may be a stranger. Many of the students will not know their classmate with ASD.

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PLANNING FOR THE TRANSITION PROCESS
WILL IDEALLY BEGIN SEVERAL MONTHS
BEFORE THE ACTUAL TRANSITION OCCURS.

In any given class, the student may find no familiar faces. The student might change classes not only every period, but sometimes may have certain classes for only a semester, a quarter or on alternate days. There will be greater demands for independence in terms of work habits. The homework assignments will be more complex and involve more hours of work. There will be different and more complex social demands within the cultural setting of the school and during extracurricular activities.

But, there also are new opportunities that were not available in elementary school. Careful planning can make the transition to middle school a success. Planning for the transition process ideally will begin several months before the actual transition occurs. Following is an outline for a process that others have used in developing a successful transition plan. Of course, additional steps may be needed in individual cases.

STEP I. PREPARATION DURING THE LAST YEAR IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

It's a good idea for the elementary school team to visit the middle school to:

- Meet teachers and administrators in the middle school
- Learn about important differences between elementary and middle school, and about new expectations
- Obtain some of the middle school textbooks or course outlines to help determine placement when levels of classes are offered
- Obtain information about school policy, traditions and so forth
- Obtain information for parents about the new school, including its faculty, opportunities, challenges, rules and traditions
- Develop a list of important skills that the student might need in the new school environment

STEP II. PLANNING THE CURRICULUM, GOALS AND SCHEDULE FOR THE FALL TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

The elementary school team can:

- Gather information, prior to the individual educational program (IEP) meeting, about the student's strengths, challenges, interests, and need for technology, support and accommodations/modifications
- Discuss a potential schedule with the parents and the receiving middle school team regarding the student's need for balance in his schedule, breaks and opportunity for resource support. Sensory challenges also must be considered as the schedule is designed
- Develop a list of helpful strategies, a student portfolio or a video that shows the student's personality and strengths

STEP III. PREPARING THE PARENTS

The elementary school team can:

- Discuss with parents how they can assist their child over the summer to become ready for the transition
- Share materials to familiarize parents and the student with the new school (e.g., map, student handbook, lunch menu, yearbook)
- Discuss how parents can communicate with the new teachers to ensure an easy transition; provide



information about school activities and faculty expectations regarding homework

- Identify parent support and booster groups so that parents can become involved in school-sponsored activities
- Remind parents of school personnel serving as the case manager or primary contacts, and establish contact
- Discuss developing an ongoing means of communication with the middle school contact person and other staff

STEP IV. PREPARING THE STUDENT

The parents or school team can:

- Write a social story or series of stories to help the student prepare for the change
- Allow the student to have as many visits to the new school as needed
- Practice walking the route to classes while the building is empty, or even make a video
- Identify important areas, including a safe haven, bus stop, homeroom, bathrooms, cafeteria and gym
- Provide opportunities to practice opening and closing his or her locker
- Help the student understand school rules (even the unwritten ones)
- Review the yearbook to familiarize the student with the faculty and school activities during the year
- Take the student to parent-student orientation
- Practice scripts so that the student knows where to get help and how to ask for assistance
- Practice requesting to go to a quiet place to calm down; practice the route to get to that place
- Prepare the student to understand that each teacher has different rules and procedures, and that the student will need to be flexible with each teacher's rules
- Buy a special notebook with dividers that will help the student stay organized
- Ask for orientation and mobility training at the IEP meeting (Sayers, 2006)
- Ask for assistive technology, such as a tape recorder, for documenting the student's homework (Sayers, 2006)
- Ask for a laptop computer, such as an Alpha Smart, to assist a child with poor writing skills (Sayers, 2006)

- Arrange a carpool with another student(s) so that the child with ASD is not walking into school alone (Sayers, 2006)
- Obtain books and other resources about middle school issues and social rules (Sayers, 2006).

STEP V. PREPARING THE STAFF

The middle school or autism support team can:

- Inform the teaching staff as soon as possible that they will be receiving a student with ASD
- Plan how teachers will be prepared, informed and supported
- Provide staff with an information packet that includes the names of videos, books and web sites about ASD
- Identify whom to contact if staff have questions or problems
- Identify an older student who can serve as a mentor to the student with ASD during the new school term; have the children meet and spend some time getting acquainted prior to the start of school
- Assist staff and aides so they are ready with adaptations/modifications for the first week
- Advise staff that they will need to closely monitor comprehension of material, since many students with ASD excel at memorizing information without processing or understanding it
- Plan to meet often as a group/support team to proactively and quickly solve problems
- Discuss expectations with parents regarding the amount of homework and their role in meeting due dates and completing assignments
- Negotiate the best method of quick and reliable communication between parents and school personnel

While this list is geared toward the needs of the student who will be active in the general education classroom, many of the same steps are appropriate for the student who will be in a more restrictive program. This list is not all-inclusive, and individual steps should be added to meet the needs of specific students and their school system. Many of the same strategies will be needed when preparing for the transition from middle school to high school.

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