

Transition to Middle School

Background

Many parents lose sleep worrying about their children going from elementary up to middle school. If your child has a disability, this anxiety can increase dramatically! Your concern is understandable. There are many new challenges and demands in middle school. But it is also an exciting time for your child to develop new skills and grow more independent.

Every child has challenges and strengths that affect the ability to transition. Many of the factors that make the move to middle school difficult are the same for all children, whether or not they have a disability. So, we must look at experiences from the broader community and then apply what we know about our own children to plan for success.

What Parents Need to Know

When your child transitions from ECI to preschool programs or from high school to adult life, there are laws and regulations in place to guide that process. This is not the case when you are going from elementary school to middle school. The strategies used to help a child make that transition are driven by what the ARD team decides. You will need to be proactive to see that a good plan is in place for this big change!

When you transition to any new school, it's a good time to update your child's [student portfolio](#). This is a great way to introduce your child to the new team! A good portfolio provides information that is not found in the IEP, such as what your child likes and dislikes, and much more. Your child's portfolio will evolve and change as he grows. It can be very useful when it's time to look at transitioning to adulthood. You'll have a good history, in writing, of your child's strengths, challenges and interests.

Course selection for the first year of middle school occurs at the middle to end of elementary school. It's a good idea to include your child in these [choices](#) to the greatest extent possible, especially if they are interested in music as they usually have a separate night/day for instrument selection. Make sure you have looked at the course catalog for your school district to see all the offerings. Having a disability should not limit the choices offered.

Often, the elementary school will schedule a field trip to the middle school - make sure your child is included in this experience or plan an extra day to visit. Many middle schools have orientation and this is an important event for parents and students to attend. This is an excellent opportunity for you to become familiar with the campus and school staff. Sometimes middle schools offer a parent information night for future 6th grade parents - you should attend, even if your child participates in a more segregated placement, as it will give you an opportunity to meet the principal and staff from the middle school.

For students beginning ninth grade in 2014-2015 or later, the [Foundation High School Program](#) requires successful completion of 22 credits (or 26 credits with endorsements) in order for a [student to qualify for graduation](#). (See TEA's [Graduation Toolkit](#) for an explanation of high school credits and endorsements.) Some middle schools offer

courses which earn a student high school credit in the eighth grade (PE, Art, languages, etc.). It's important to learn about these requirements early in middle school if your child plans to take high school level courses as an eighth grader.

In addition, your middle school may offer a career planning survey in seventh or eighth grade. Students with disabilities should participate in these surveys. Check with your special education teacher, counselor or case manager to ensure your child is included in these or other programs offered to typical students. For more information, see [Transition & the Future](#), as well as [Transition in the IEP](#).

Some children may need assistive technology devices or supports to ensure they can be educated beside their non-disabled peers. Since your child will most likely be in a new environment (the middle school), you might need to take a look at whether AT supports are needed. Remember, AT supports range from simple, low-cost and low-tech ideas to more complex, high-tech devices. For instance, if your child has been focusing on handwriting during the elementary years and still struggles, maybe it's time to consider switching to keyboarding. [AT supports](#) that allow students to function independently are preferable to a paraprofessionals' or teachers' one-to-one help (remember in a college environment, there will not be an aide provided in class).

It's a good idea to predict the challenges your child may face in middle school long before they get there. One tool you can use is [futures](#) planning. If you envision the goals you have for your child when they reach adulthood, you can work backward to build skills to achieve those goals. For instance, you may want your child to begin using a daily planner while still in elementary school in preparation for middle school. This will help them develop good organizational habits important in adulthood.

Often parents are concerned about social pressures this age brings. No doubt early adolescence is a trying time for many! But resist the urge to have your child educated solely in a self-contained classroom for this reason. Remember, many people with disabilities who were educated this way live an adult life that looks very much like their education – separated and isolated. It's likely you want your child to be included in the community as an adult. There will be some difficulties, but it's important to stay the course if you want your child to live an inclusive life later on.

Last, it's only natural to wonder what is going on inside "that big building," but resist the urge to visit for the sole purpose of observing your child too soon or too often. Volunteer with the PTA/PTO to spend time on campus. Don't expect to talk to teachers about specific concerns without an appointment while you are there. Be considerate of their schedules and ask to speak to them during their conference period if necessary.

Don't forget the home program!

Just as your child has a plan to optimize progress at school, you should have a plan to teach new skills or reinforce skills at home. Every moment is a teachable moment and, opportunities to learn important lessons occur in everyday life.

Some ideas that might be particularly useful in getting ready for middle school include setting up social scenarios outside of school which closely resemble what your child will

face at school. There are many resources on teaching and promoting social skills. Also, seek out groups that are (or should be) inclusive of children with disabilities, such as Boy Scouts of America. Often, fine arts activities including band, theater, art or debate may help your child build a supportive friend network. Ask parents or school counselors if they feel one group is a better fit for your child than another. This may vary by school or by region.

The transition to middle school is often the scariest time for parents since their children first entered Kindergarten. Though it's hard to let go, even a little, strategies to help foster your child's independence will pay off with big rewards as they mature. Set goals at home with short term objectives to move towards greater independence. Hopefully, this will generalize to the school setting.

Now is a good time to let your child be involved in decisions regarding their future to the greatest extent possible. It is natural at this age for children to want to exert more control in their lives.

Whether or not your child has a disability, adolescence brings with it an increased risk of anxiety or depression. Being proactive, having a plan, and engaging in open communication with your child can ensure any problems can be dealt with as soon as they arise. Keep your long-term goals in mind and remember these are exciting years for your child. Sharing in that excitement and keeping your "eye on the prize" will help you get through the middle school years to (yikes!) high school and beyond. For some more detailed suggestions to prepare for the transition, read *Middle School: Challenges and Plans*.

Important Legal Considerations

In the state of Texas, children ages 10 to 17 are considered juveniles and are subject to more serious legal consequences than younger children for behavior-related problems. There can be controversy and disagreement on whether problem behaviors are a feature of your child's disability and will be treated as such. [When my Student is Disciplined at School](#) by Texas Appleseed or [When Schools Have Children Arrested for Behavior-Related Problems](#) by Pete Wright, Esq., are two resources which may be helpful. If your child with a disability has a change of placement for 10 days or more due to a disciplinary action, a manifestation determination review (MDR) must be scheduled within 10 days of this decision. See more information in your [Procedural Safeguards](#) document.

Transition Resources:

Middle School: [Challenges and Plans](#)

Other Resources:

Texas Project FIRST - [Middle School Concerns & Strategies](#)

US Dept. of Education - [Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence](#)

[Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills](#) (curriculum) - Please note that the Middle School curriculum can be found in the TEKS "by chapter" section.

[Texas Middle School Diagnostic Reading Assessment](#) - This is an assessment that all 7th grade students, including students with disabilities, should take in the first 6 weeks of school.

National Middle School Association:

[Transitioning to Middle School](#) - Links and articles for parents

[The Elementary to Middle School Transition: Five Helpful Hints for Parents](#)

National Education Assn. - [Transition to Middle School](#)

PACER Center - [Middle and High School Transition Planning](#)

Pacer Center Resources - [Top Concerns for Parents of Children 6 to 13](#)

PBS Kids Go! - [Middle School](#)

[Texas Middle School Association](#) - Parent Resource section

Smoothing Your Child's Transition to Middle School by
Greatschools.org <http://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/smoothing-your-childs-transition-to-middle-school/>

Mind Publications - [Moving from Elementary to Junior High is a Big Adjustment](#)

Bullying:

National Middle School Association - [Research Summary](#)

StopBullying.Gov (US Dept. of Health & Human Services) - [Bullying Among Children with Disabilities and Special Health Needs](#)

TEACCH (Univ. of North Carolina) - [Strategies for Surviving Middle School with an Included Child with Autism](#)

PACER's [National Bullying Prevention Center](#) - [What Parents Should Know About Bullying](#) and [Bullying & Harassment of Students with Disabilities](#)