



Middle school malaise

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The switch from elementary to junior high school coincides with several major changes for young adolescents. Most are in the throes of puberty; they're becoming more self-aware and self-conscious, and their thinking is growing more critical and more complex. At the same time, adolescents are often "in a slump" when it comes to academic motivation and performance.

Researchers at the University of Michigan have studied the transition from elementary to middle school and have found that:

- On average, children's grades drop dramatically during the first year of middle school compared to their grades in elementary school.
- After moving to junior high school, children become less interested in school and less self-assured about their abilities.
- Compared to elementary schools, middle schools are more controlling, less cognitively challenging and focus more on competition and comparing students' ability.

Through this and other similar research, psychologists have discovered a "developmental mismatch" between the environment and philosophy of middle schools and the children they attempt to teach. At a time when children's cognitive abilities are increasing, middle school offers them fewer opportunities for decision-making and lower levels of cognitive involvement, but a more complex social environment. At the same time, numerous teachers have replaced the single classroom teacher and students often face larger classes and a new group of peers.

These factors all interact to make the transition to junior high school difficult for many youngsters. Studies find the decreased motivation and self-assuredness contribute to poor academic performance; poor grades trigger more self-doubt and a downward spiral can begin.

New learning environment and new goals

Elementary schools and elementary teachers often tend to be more task-oriented in their teaching: The goal is to master a certain task such as learning addition or subtraction.

In junior high schools, however, the goal of teaching often becomes attaining a certain grade. Learning is still key, but measuring performance is also part of the equation.

As the goals of the game change, some students adjust and thrive while others do not. Why?

Many psychologists who study childhood education believe that an important key is how children think about their own intelligence and abilities. If a child thinks of his or her intelligence as fixed — I'm either this dumb or this smart — he or she will avoid tasks that challenge their ability or risk failure. Instead, they choose to work on problems that they already know how to solve.

Children who think of intelligence as malleable — they believe they can get smarter if they work at it — look for challenging tasks and look at failure as a way to learn and improve. These children tend to blame their failures on a lack of effort rather than a lack of ability.

Which students do the best?

According to the research, children who believe that intelligence can change over time made the best adjustment to secondary school; this is true even if these children had low self-confidence. It was actually the high-confidence kids who believed that their intelligence was fixed who had the most trouble making the transition. These kids apparently believed that they should be able to do well because they were smart and that extra effort in order to learn a new skill was not necessary. When "effortless" learning did not take place, these students lost confidence, motivation and interest.

What can parents do?

- Encourage your child to try new things, learn new skills.
- Tell them that it is OK to fail and act that way when they do fail.
- Teach them that learning takes effort, time and practice.

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