The Transition to Middle School

by Steven W. Evans, Ph.D., Zewelanji Serpell, Ph.D., and Casey White

Children with AD/HD are left especially vulnerable to obstacles associated with the social and academic demands of middle school.

THE TRANSITION TO MIDDLE SCHOOL brings exciting but challenging experiences for both parents and children, particularly those children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD). Parents often approach this shift with great trepidation as they watch and foster their child's growing independence, while simultaneously wondering whether there is such a thing as "normal" development during the middle school years. In fact, the term "maturation" may seem counterintuitive given the nature of the many changes children experience at this age.

Middle school affords new opportunities for choice, ranging from selecting elective classes to making decisions about how to behave in unsupervised situations such as hallways and bathrooms, and in situations involving opportunities for experimenting with drugs and alcohol or engaging in sexual behavior and delinquent activities. However, along with these choices, come higher expectations to demonstrate independence, exercise self-control and make wise decisions. Many students are unprepared to cope with the responsibilities of independence as they struggle with the emotional and physical changes associated with puberty that already make this developmental stage difficult.

The amount of adult monitoring dramatically decreases in middle school, and the change in the student/teacher relationship is one of the most significant factors affecting children's transition. Middle school teachers are expected to know over 100 students whom they see for short intervals of time resulting in limited knowledge about each student. In addition, teachers do not consistently observe students during transitions between classes, trips to the restroom and at recess.

Furthermore, while elementary school teachers are told about problems in settings in which they do not accompany the child—such as the bus or cafeteria—most middle schools do not have a designated individual who serves as the repository of such information. Therefore, no one person in middle school monitors progress and problems closely, adjusts expectations in response to stressful situations or addresses situations in a big picture context. These and other student supports associated with the role elementary school teachers play are what keep many children with AD/HD afloat during their early years of schooling. The removal of this valuable safety net can have a detrimental effect on success, and children with AD/HD are left especially vulnerable to obstacles associated with the social and academic demands of middle school.

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Academic Challenges

The academic expectations for independence, organization and task completion without the support of the caring elementary school teacher can make the transition to middle school academically challenging. One of the most obvious areas affected by the increased expectation is the management of assignments and preparation for tests and quizzes. Organizational challenges are further complicated by the varying behavioral and academic expectations from teacher to teacher and class to class. Students are frequently given assignment notebooks along with prompts and reminders, but the organizational demands on middle school students with AD/HD may lead to frustration and failure. Parents often become frustrated at not knowing what is due and when tests will occur and therefore feel unable to help their child. Many students complicate things further by presenting their parents with excuses about why they do not have to complete the work in their notebook or why the note from the teacher about missing assignments is not a true problem.

Many students also experience difficulties with studying and comprehension. Passive and inefficient study habits are common among youth with AD/HD. As a result, even when they remember a test and bring home the materials to study, their preparation time can yield disappointing results. Middle school students are also typically required to do more independent writing than is required in elementary school. Sometimes this takes the form of short answer or essay questions on tests and assignments; at other times it involves writing reports or stories. These can be challenging tasks because written language requires the *organization* of thoughts into phrases, sentences and paragraphs and *attention to the details* of grammar, spelling and punctuation. These tend to be weak areas for middle school students with AD/HD, and their written products are frequently deficient.

Social Challenges

While the academic challenges may be more obvious, the social demands upon adolescents are no less daunting. The middle school years are socially challenging for even the most socially skilled students. Loyalty between friends is frequently compromised by the opportunity to gain social acceptance from others by revealing a secret or blemish about a friend. Behavior exhibited by one child may gain quick acceptance as humorous by peers while the same behavior exhibited by a less accepted student may be ridiculed and lead to the ostracizing of the unskilled student. Conformity with style, knowledge about the latest music and sports trivia and recognition of the ever-changing social status of peers are keys to a child's social acceptance among peers. Social success in early adolescence requires mastery of an incredibly complex set of skills and knowledge.

Children with AD/HD often experience problems with peer interactions because they lack understanding of these complexities, including reading the social behaviors of peers and recognizing the cause and effect relationships between their behavior and the behavior of others. Students with AD/HD-predominantly combined-type are especially at risk for social rejection, as they may come across as intrusive, disruptive and aggressive. For example, in conversations they may annoy their peers by interrupting, talking excessively or forgetting what others have said. As a result of such behaviors, many students with AD/HD experience active peer rejection in the form of teasing and bullying or are simply ignored. Similar problems often occur with teacher-student relationships, and these may be further compromised by problems these students have with authority.

Social deficits vary greatly among children with AD/HD, but those with obvious social problems are particularly at risk for making poor decisions regarding smoking and other substance use. In middle school many children have their first exposure to alcohol, tobacco and other substances, and they frequently receive a lot of peer pressure to experiment. Youth

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with AD/HD tend to have unrealistic impressions of their peers' attitudes and may experiment because they think everyone is doing it. Middle school youth also have a limited understanding of how the choices they make regarding peers influence their behaviors. As a consequence, many engage in sexual behaviors, delinquent acts and substance use as a means of being accepted into social groups they perceive as popular or "cool."

Preparing for the Transition

Despite the challenges associated with the middle school years, many students with AD/HD surmount the difficulties and demonstrate success. Parents play an important role in preparing their child for, and guiding them through, the middle school transition. Relatively simple steps such as establishing a homework management plan, monitoring friendship patterns and facilitating positive social interactions can make a big difference in the developmental process. It is important for parents of youth with AD/HD to recognize that this is a difficult developmental stage for the vast majority of children (and their parents). Some of the most helpful things parents can do to prepare for this transition include knowing what to expect, advocating for their child, managing their own stress and mental health, and finding ways to accept their child and show that they love him or her despite the problems. A couple of helpful resources for parents and children are listed at the end of this article. ■

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Resources

Robin, A.L. (1998). *AD/HD in Adolescents.* New York: The Guilford Press.

Zeigler-Dendy, C.A. & Zeigler, A. (2003). *A Bird's-Eye View of Life with ADD and AD/HD: Advice from Young Survivors.* Cedar Bluff, Alabama: Cherish the Children.

Conference Notes

Stephen Evans will provide an update on treatment of AD/HD in adolescents at CHADD's Annual Conference in Dallas, Texas, October 27–29, 2005.

Editor's Note:
La traducción al español de este artículo comienza en la página 43.

The Spanish translation of this article begins on page 43.