

## PATHWAY RESOURCE GUIDE

# NextStep

### *Helping Your Child Thrive Through the Middle School Transition*

What the Research Shows — and What Parents Can Do About It

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## Why the Middle School Transition Matters

If you're reading this, you probably already sense it: something is shifting. Maybe your fifth grader, who used to come home chatty and confident, is suddenly quieter. Maybe they're worried about the new school. Maybe homework battles are starting. Maybe their friends are changing — and so are they.

You're not imagining it. The transition from elementary to middle school is one of the most psychologically significant events of a young person's life. Researchers have called it one of the most stressful events young adolescents will experience, and the data backs up what parents have long suspected — this is not just a change of building. It is a change in identity, expectations, environment, and self-concept, all happening at once.

Here is what the research consistently shows:

- **Academic performance often dips.** U.S. studies have repeatedly documented declines in grades and academic achievement during the move from elementary to middle school, with some students struggling to recover for years afterward.
- **Self-concept takes a hit.** Children's beliefs about their own abilities — particularly in subjects like math and English — tend to drop during this period, even when their actual ability has not changed.
- **Anxiety becomes more salient.** The median age of onset for anxiety disorders is 11 — exactly the age most children transition. The school environment can be a powerful trigger or a powerful protector.
- **Social networks reorganize.** Roughly 60% of friendships from elementary school do not survive the move. Children must rebuild their social world from scratch, often while navigating early puberty.
- **Goal structures shift.** Elementary classrooms tend to emphasize learning and mastery. Middle school classrooms emphasize performance and comparison. This shift alone has been linked to disengagement and increased anxiety.

*The transition coincides with early adolescence — a period of rapid biological, social, and psychological development. The result is that the very moment children most need stability, their world becomes least stable. That's not a parenting failure. It's developmental reality.*

## The Three Domains of a Successful Transition

Researchers Hall and DiPerna identified three domains that together determine whether a child transitions successfully: peer relationships, academic ability, and emotional health. These are not independent. A wobble in one tends to ripple into the others.

### 1. Peer Relationships

Children renegotiate their entire social network during this transition. Some children find this freeing — particularly children who were victimized in elementary school, who research shows can use the transition as an opportunity to re-author their social identity. Others find it deeply destabilizing.

Pre-transition friendship quality predicts post-transition well-being across multiple dimensions: academic achievement, loneliness, self-esteem, and school involvement. Children who arrive with at least one strong friendship — and the social skills to build new ones — fare significantly better.

### 2. Academic Self-Concept and Performance

Academic self-concept refers to the beliefs a child holds about their own learning. Studies show that academic self-concept tends to decline during the transition, even for high-achieving students. The shift from a single classroom and single teacher to multiple classrooms with multiple teachers creates more opportunities for ambiguous social and academic feedback — which an anxious or perfectionistic child may interpret negatively.

Self-control and executive functioning are particularly important here. Longitudinal research has found that students with stronger self-control adjust better following the transition, earning higher grades in English, math, and science. This is a teachable skill set, not a fixed trait.

### 3. Emotional Health

This is where the research gets most relevant for parents. Anxiety symptoms can intensify during the transition, particularly in girls and particularly in domains tied to performance (math anxiety, for example, has been found to spike for girls during this period before settling back down). Depression risk also rises, especially for children who arrive at the transition with pre-existing concerns or perfectionism.

But here is the protective finding that should give you hope: parental autonomy support — that is, parenting that encourages your child's own self-governance and independence rather than micromanaging — has been shown to predict declines in depression after the move to middle school. How you parent through this transition genuinely matters.

## Which Children Are Most Vulnerable?

Not every child experiences the transition the same way. Research has identified several factors that increase risk of a difficult transition:

- **High pre-transition anxiety or worry.** Children who voice many concerns before the move are more likely to struggle after it. This is one of the most consistent findings in the literature.
- **Special educational needs.** Children with learning differences, attention concerns, or sensory and mobility issues face additional layers of complexity and report higher rates of victimization and lower social support.
- **Girls, on average.** Girls report higher general and school-related anxiety, more peer-related stress, and higher rates of math anxiety during the transition than boys do. This is not a parenting issue — it's a developmental pattern.
- **Children with conduct or attention concerns.** Externalizing symptoms before the transition predict academic decline after it.
- **Children with thinner social networks.** Lower peer acceptance and fewer close friendships pre-transition predict lower well-being post-transition.

If your child fits into one or more of these categories, that does not mean they are doomed to a difficult transition. It means they may benefit from more deliberate preparation — exactly the kind of work the NextStep program is designed to do.

## What Actually Helps

The research literature is clearer about what protects children than it is about any single intervention. Several factors emerge consistently:

### Parental Autonomy Support

This is the single most powerful protective factor identified in the research. Autonomy support means parenting in a way that encourages your child's self-governance — supporting their problem-solving rather than solving for them, allowing reasonable risk and recovery, and treating mistakes as data rather than disasters. Studies have found that parental presence at home before and after school is also one of the strongest predictors of a positive transition.

### Strong Pre-Transition Social Skills

Children who arrive with the ability to make a friend, recover from a social misstep, and read peer dynamics adapt faster. These are skills, not personality traits — and they can be coached.

## Self-Control and Executive Function

Self-control predicts better grades following the transition. Children with stronger executive functioning — planning, organizing, sustaining attention, regulating emotions — handle the structural demands of middle school (multiple teachers, more homework, more freedom) far more easily.

## Mastery-Oriented Mindset

A mastery orientation means working to grow rather than working to prove. Research shows that the shift toward performance-based goals in middle school can heighten anxiety. Children who have internalized a mastery orientation — often nurtured through how parents respond to grades, mistakes, and effort — are buffered from this shift.

## Belongingness and Connection

Australian research has found that increases in school belongingness predict decreases in mental health problems, even after controlling for prior mental health. Helping your child find a place — a club, a sport, a group of peers, a trusted adult on staff — is one of the most concrete protective steps you can take.

# Warning Signs to Watch For

Most children adjust to middle school within a few months. But some warning signs warrant a closer look — and possibly professional support:

- Grades that drop sharply and don't recover by the end of the first semester.
- Persistent statements of self-criticism, hopelessness, or worthlessness.
- Increasing somatic complaints — headaches, stomachaches, frequent requests to stay home.
- Social withdrawal beyond what reorganization of friendships would explain.
- Sleep disturbance, appetite changes, or loss of interest in previously loved activities.
- Rising anxiety about school, tests, peers, or being seen — especially if it's interfering with daily functioning.
- Conduct concerns that are new or escalating.

These are not signs of failure. They are signals that your child needs more support than the transition is naturally providing.

# How NextStep Supports This Transition

NextStep is the entry tier of the Pathway program, designed specifically for children navigating the elementary-to-middle-school transition. Drawing from positive discipline, developmental psychology, and clinical experience with hundreds of families, NextStep is built around what the research says actually matters:

- **Building executive functioning skills** — planning, organization, time management, and emotional regulation — before they're tested by middle school's structural demands.
- **Coaching social skills and friendship resilience** — helping your child build the relational tools to renegotiate their social world without losing themselves in it.
- **Cultivating a mastery mindset** — shifting your child's internal narrative from “prove” to “grow,” so the performance pressure of middle school doesn't define them.
- **Identifying and addressing pre-transition worries** — because pre-transition concerns are one of the most reliable predictors of post-transition difficulty, and they're addressable.
- **Equipping parents** — translating research into the kind of autonomy-supportive parenting practices that protect children through this period.

The goal is not to eliminate the difficulty of the middle school transition. That difficulty is developmental and, in some ways, valuable. The goal is to ensure your child has what they need — internally and relationally — to come through it stronger, not smaller.

## How the Program Works

NextStep is delivered as a structured five-meeting program, beginning with a comprehensive psychological assessment.

### Initial Assessment — BASC-3

Before the first meeting, both the student and parents independently complete the BASC-3 (Behavior Assessment System for Children, Third Edition) — a standardized, norm-referenced behavioral assessment used by clinical psychologists. The instrument produces detailed scoring across emotional, behavioral, social, and adaptive domains, and the multi-rater format provides an integrated picture from both perspectives. Results are scored and clinically interpreted before the first meeting and inform every subsequent step of the program.

### Meeting 1 — Intake (Student and Parents)

A working meeting with the student and parents together to review the BASC-3 results, discuss the family's specific concerns and goals, and establish the focus for the work ahead. The intake produces a personalized roadmap that guides the three working sessions.

### Meetings 2, 3, and 4 — Working Sessions (Student)

Three structured sessions with the student alone, focused on the specific readiness work the assessment and roadmap identified — building executive function skills before middle school's structural demands test them, coaching social skills and friendship resilience, cultivating a mastery mindset, and addressing pre-transition worries.

## Meeting 5 — Family Integration

A closing 30–45 minute meeting with the parents and student together to present the personalized recommendations, walk through what was accomplished, align on how the family will support the work going forward, and review a written summary of recommendations the family takes home.

## A Final Word for Parents

If your family is in this transition right now, take a breath. The fact that you are reading a research-informed white paper on this topic tells me something about you — you are exactly the kind of parent your child needs in this season.

The transition will be bumpy. Some of those bumps are signs of growth. Others are signs that more support is needed. The hard part of parenting an early adolescent is learning to tell the difference.

That's where I come in. If you'd like to talk about whether NextStep is a fit for your family — or simply to think through what your child is going through — I'd be glad to hear from you.

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## Selected Research

This white paper draws on the peer-reviewed research literature on the elementary-to-middle-school transition. Key sources include:

Bouchard, K. L., & Wong, M. (2025). Now and Then: Examining Students' Concerns About the Primary-Secondary School Transition. *Journal of Early Adolescence*.

Evans, D., Borriello, G. A., & Field, A. P. (2018). A Review of the Academic and Psychological Impact of the Transition to Secondary Education. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1482.

van Tetering, M. A. J., Jolles, J., van der Elst, W., & Jolles, D. D. (2022). School Achievement in Early Adolescence Is Associated With Students' Self-Perceived Executive Functions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 734576.

Hall, A. C. G., & DiPerna, J. C. (2017). Childhood social skills as predictors of middle school academic adjustment. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 37(6), 825–851.

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