

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## **PARENTS CAN HELP: SUCCESSFUL GRADE TRANSITION**

Each academic transition has its own rite of passage whether it is socialization concerns at the elementary level, jitters about changing classes in middle school or the responsibilities and freedoms of high school. When children enter school they need to adapt to standards of behavior, teacher expectations, and social pressure to fit in with their peers. Transitional periods can be opportunities to understand and adapt to the new environment.

### **Understanding Child Development**

Facilitating smooth and successful transitions requires an awareness of each child's developmental level. There is wide agreement about certain patterns in a child's development that can be attributed to such scientists as Piaget and Erickson, and that are validated by numerous academic research studies nationally. All developmental theorists can agree that growth and development follow universal and reasonably predictable patterns, but a child's rate of development, culture, personality and environment all influence development. Normal differences in development can span two chronological years or two grade levels. Since growth can be uneven, learning may occur in spurts followed by consolidation. Understanding these theories of change can help us to understand what children are going through without limiting them with unrealistic expectations.

### **Transitions – Social, Emotional and Academic**

#### ***Kindergarten through Third***

Socially, children in grades K-3 are still learning to be friends with both sexes, but by the end of this stage, boys and girls will separate into gender groups. Emotionally, these youngsters are self-centered but need and seek approval from adults. Academically, this is a time when children are gradually moving from learning to play and to communicate, to playing with the goal of learning new information. In addition, they are making sound symbol associations and are learning to read. Between K and 1<sup>st</sup> grade there is a shift in cognitive development that is accompanied by a shift in reasoning and understanding of cause and effect. Your child's curriculum includes learning through the senses by touching, seeing, smelling, tasting, and hearing rather than by thinking alone. Homework becomes a consistent daily routine during these years.

#### ***Fourth through Eighth***

When children reach grades 4-8, socialization is influenced by their major growth spurts. The advanced maturity of girls as compared to boys can be a source of awkwardness, jokes and embarrassment. Joining clubs and groups of those with similar interests becomes very important. At this age children still have difficulty understanding the perspective of others, but do recognize the benefits of making siblings, peers and grownups happy. Emotionally, they need to feel accepted and worthwhile, tend to be competitive and, at times, overreact to failure. There is an increase in their moral thinking, in their sense of justness and fairness and in their need to be part of something important. Academically, 4th graders are still concrete learners but are increasingly able to deal with multiple variables. The transition to middle school during fifth and sixth grades is quite significant. Children are moving from thinking concretely in absolutes, to thinking logically and abstractly. Children are no longer learning to read, they are reading in order to learn and reading and integrating multiple sources of information. The structure and environment of middle school demands a higher level of independence than elementary school. Your child is going from a protected environment to one where he must be more self-reliant. Middle-school students stay together for most of the day and move from class to class for different subjects with different teachers. If your child is attending junior high, she'll move from class to class by herself rather than in a group. In both cases, students must remember

their schedules and organize their belongings with minimal help from others. They are expected to manage six or seven classes, to keep a planner, to manage daily homework as well as long-term assignments and projects. Often, they must also deal with a significant change in the size of the school.

### ***Ninth Grade: Starting High School***

A transition to high school increases social challenges. Younger teens are seeking autonomy from parents and have difficulty with compromise. Relationship skills are increasingly developed while unsettled emotions are common. Employment and education fill their need for social interaction. Independence and identity become issues of primary importance. Teens are likely to set goals based on feelings of personal priority and they may reject goals set by others. Upon entering high school, an adolescent will encounter significant changes in the numbers of students in each class and the number of teachers they encounter. They are expected to be independent learners and cognitively are in a phase where they are perfecting their cognitive reasoning skills. These advanced cognitions can lead to increased motivation to perform and to do well.

### **Grade Transitions and Parents**

Creating a balance between home and school is important in facilitating and supporting the academic endeavors of your child in concert with his or her emotional development. If your child is transitioning to a new school, schedule a pre-first day visit to help acclimate your child to the surroundings. For a younger child, encourage the child to discuss the future transition by asking him or her specific questions. Compile a list of your child's concerns and together try to find answers to the questions. Schedule a visit during an open house, or actual school day to help familiarize your child with the school surroundings and the routine. Seek out parents whose children are also transitioning and schedule play dates so your child will have a buddy in the new classroom. You can also schedule introductions with teachers and school leaders. For older children contact school ambassadors that allow a peer or older student to show your child around. Often future students are permitted to sit in on classes that they will be taking during the upcoming year. Be available after school starts. Understand that your child may need extra family time, attention, love and support. When there is a change, he or she may regress to an earlier developmental stage. Help your child explore ways to cope with concerns, and continue to be available for further discussion. Be ready to problem-solve. By taking an active helpful role in the child's academic achievements, parents can help broaden the student's horizons, increase his or her self-esteem, and provide a foundation for the upcoming stage of higher education.

**Written and developed by Kimberly S. Williams, M.A. and the staff of the NYU Child Study Center.**

### **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).

**AboutOurKids.org**

THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER ONLINE

**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health  
NYU Child Study Center**

577 First Avenue  
New York, NY 10016  
(212) 263-6622

1981 Marcus Avenue, Suite C102  
Lake Success, NY 11042  
(516) 358-1808

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