

Transition from elementary school to middle school

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In preparing this article on making the transition from elementary school to middle school, I sat down with Gene Duke, a Special Education/ In Class Support Teacher at DeMasi Middle School in the Evesham Public School District in Marlton, New Jersey. She received her degree in Education from Glassboro State College and a Masters Degree in Education with a Specialization in Special Education from Lehigh University. She is also the Founder and Curriculum Director for Girls Matter. She brings to this discussion a wealth of information and insight, having had decades of experience working with disabled students. We will first identify common difficulties and obstacles faced by disabled students and move on to discuss specific remedies and strategies for success. Knowledge of the student's rights will be discussed. Guidance for when to seek out additional help will also be reviewed.

One of the most obvious elements of transition from elementary school to middle school is moving to a new environment. Middle schools are by design larger than elementary schools. They include students from a wider geographical area and are likely to be much less homogeneous than most elementary schools. Not only will the student population be more diverse, most of the staff will be unfamiliar with the new student. For disabled students, this poses additional challenges. Many disabled youth come to rely on the support that elementary school staff, familiar with their situation, routinely offer. Parents often have a more intimate involvement in the day-to-day life of elementary schools. By middle school, parents are not so plentiful in the hallways. A disabled student may not have much experience or confidence articulating his/her needs to strangers. Students with hearing impairment or other barriers to communication may find the new school intimidating on many levels. A larger environment poses many physical challenges as well. Students with mobility difficulties or visual impairments can be overwhelmed by these changes.

Middle school also frequently marks the first time students have had to change classrooms or manage their own locker. Students are expected to work independently, be organized and manage time well. The size and weight of textbooks and other required materials is dramatically increased from what was previously required. The size of print used in textbooks is typically smaller and scientific calculators may be required. The Physical Education curriculum is more demanding. In addition to Art and Music, most students will also now have classes in Industrial Technology and Family & Consumer Science. For many disabled students this expanded curriculum will reveal areas of difficulty previously unknown, not only to them, but to their parents as well. To say that this transition is challenging is an understatement indeed. Unfortunately for the student this transition occurs during puberty, a time of life known to be fraught with hazard and emotional upheaval for one and all. It is a wonder that any disabled student ever survived such a daunting task. Let's begin to explore some of the tactics that successful students have relied upon. These comments are directed to students, but parents and educators can read along and learn a few things as well!

1. **Know your rights.** Understanding your Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a must. As a middle school student you should be included in the preparation and discussion of the IEP. You are often in the best position to know what you need or identify what is not working for you. You should also understand that accommodations can be changed as

needs change or new difficulties are identified. Also, consider overestimating support you may need, knowing that it is easier to quickly remove things than to add things. Lastly, depending on the nature of your disability, there may be assistive technology that could make handling the increased academic demands of middle school easier for you. Ask the Child Study Team what is available for you along these lines.

2. **Know who is on the team.** Students and parents should make a point of meeting all pertinent staff at the new school, including some of the teachers, aides, the guidance counselor, the case worker, the nurse, any therapists (i.e. PT, OT, Speech) that will be working with the student, and the principal. Students should be advised who they can seek out for guidance, assistance and support once classes begin. Parents and students should know how information will be relayed and who to contact if difficulties arise.
3. **Practice the routine before it begins.** A visit to the new school is routinely arranged for all students by their sending school, but disabled students require additional time and practice in the new environment before classes begin. Use the summer before to explore the new environment as thoroughly as possible. Learn where the bus will let you off and which entrance to go in. Find out where the gym, the library, the nurse's office, the cafeteria, the water fountains, the bathrooms, and all of the classrooms you will need to attend are. The architecture of many schools was not designed with disabled students in mind. Students with mobility issues, visual impairments, spatial orientation difficulties, or poor memories will greatly benefit from such practice. This has the added benefit of letting school staff get to know you and perhaps become acquainted with the specific challenges your disability presents. Ask for a copy of a map that has the layout of the building(s) so that you can take this home between visits and memorize where things are.
4. **Practice using your locker.** Small spaces and combination locks are a challenge for all new students, but for disabled students they can be real obstacles. If the task doesn't get easier with some practice, ask for an accommodation, like a corner locker and a key lock. Figure out how you would organize your locker and label books/supplies in a way that makes it easy for you to get what you need quickly. Get a copy of any materials the school uses to help students stay organized. If there is an agenda book, perhaps you can start working with it over the summer and become comfortable with the way information is presented. Ask if you can get a look at some of the textbooks you will be using. Make a checklist of what you will need to take with you for class, what you need to bring home every night, etc. and post it on your locker as a reminder (keep a copy at home for review as well).
5. **Begin to adjust to the school year schedule long before it begins.** Start time for middle school is often significantly earlier than elementary school. Lunchtime may be only an hour later than you have been used to eating breakfast. The sooner you begin to adopt this schedule, the easier the adjustment will be. For many students, changes will need to be made in their medication regimen because of the new wake times and meal times. Schedule an appointment with your health care provider by mid summer to review these matters. Don't wait until the week before school begins to adjust your bedtime.
6. **Build your endurance.** Fatigue and limited stamina are common among physically disabled students. To the extent possible, you should begin training your body for the additional demands the new school environment will impose. Talk to your health care provider or physical therapist about what you can do over the summer to increase your tolerance for physical exertion. If you have not had a regular exercise program till now, you should try to incorporate one into your routine. Many activities can be safely modified so that disabled children can participate.

7. **Speak up about your needs.** Many disabled children are somewhat uncomfortable discussing their unique abilities and special needs with others. They may not want to call attention to themselves. They may fear rejection or criticism. Realize that these feelings are quite common and that you are not alone. As you get older these things will not be so difficult. Now is the time, however to begin to develop a dialogue with others about your needs. Remember that you are only asking for what will allow you to be successful and that you are not taking advantage of the situation (which, of course you should never do!) or getting something that you don't deserve. If this seems overwhelming, practice a "script" with your family or a trusted friend. Sometimes disabled people must discuss personal matters with others that can be somewhat embarrassing. Be sure to ask the people you're dealing with to respect your privacy. For example, if you need a pass for liberal use of the bathroom your English teacher does not need to announce that to the whole class. Usually adults are pretty good at keeping such things confidential, but a word from you will remind people who tend to be a bit sloppy about such things. Also, if you can't think of a "script" that you would be comfortable saying, ask your doctor or nurse or therapist for some good words to use. Try some role-playing with family members so that you get some practice before you need to use these new skills. Eventually you will be so good at this that you'll hear younger disabled kids borrowing your words.
8. **Keep the first month simple.** Avoid scheduling any unnecessary appointments for the first month or so in the new school. Try to take care of all routine visits to your doctors and dentist before classes begin. Missing class during the first few weeks can really add a lot of stress. Don't wait until September to get a haircut or go shopping. Booking up your after school time with these things can take too much out of you and you want to save your energy for adjusting to the new routine. You also want to have the energy to enjoy some after school clubs and activities (which you should *absolutely* check out). Also, if you would benefit from any tutoring as you start classes you want to have ample time to fit that in your day. If everything is going smoothly, simply use the extra time to relax!
9. **Be prepared for emotionally trying times.** It is the rule, rather than the exception that the first weeks to months of middle school are stressful and overwhelming for students. Disabled students face additional struggles. Some peer interactions are negative, particularly for disabled students. Adolescents can be aggressive. They can be unkind. They can be unaccepting of people who look, sound, or behave differently. Do not accept the negative opinions about you from some misguided, mean-spirited people as reality. Do not accept mistreatment, harassment or abuse. You can try to develop a "thick skin" about minor slights and insults, but *absolutely* speak to an adult about anything that is distressing you. Journaling about your feelings can be a very powerful tactic to provide some release and give you a new perspective on your experiences. Be open to classmates who are accepting and friendly. They are certain to be there, but it may take some searching on your part. Also, sometimes, others can be ill at ease about your disability, but are open to learning more about it from you. Be prepared to explain things in a way that young people can understand. Be patient, but if your social scene isn't shaping up, ask the guidance counselor for some assistance. Sometimes, adults can prearrange situations that foster the development of friendships.
10. **Find a mentor.** Mentors are invaluable for disabled students. Older people who had lived through the difficulties you are experiencing can offer acceptance, guidance, and support like no one else can. If there are no older students who have faced similar adversity in your immediate area, ask your school and parents to try and help you connect with some

older kids who have already made it through. Of course, I invite you to contact this website.

Ms. Duke so eloquently reminded me during this interview that *a soul is never disabled*. One's body may be disabled, one's intellect may be limited, and one's learning ability may be different, but one's soul is never disabled. Adolescence is a time of finding your identity. Do not allow the labels that others place on you to define who you are. You are not just the boy in the chair, the blind girl, the hearing impaired kid, the learning disabled student. You are you – a unique individual full of promise. Keep trying, keep fighting, keep smiling, and most importantly know that **YOU ARE NOT ALONE!**