

# “But What If...?”

## Helping Parents of Special Needs Students Make the Transition

*Middle Ground, Volume 6, Number 1, August 2002*



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Looking back on that tear-filled, camera-clicking first day of kindergarten, parents are convinced nothing could be more heart wrenching ... until it's time for middle school.

The transition to middle school can be just as difficult because now “fitting in” becomes as important to students as academic success. Parents anxiously wonder how their child will be accepted by peers and teachers, whether the child will be popular, and whether he or she will continue to be nurtured by teachers as caring as those in elementary school.

These are all common parental concerns about the transition between elementary school and middle school. How do the parents of special needs students feel as they send their children out to navigate these new waters? Fitting in takes on a whole new meaning and presents a whole different set of concerns for students and their parents.

Most parents of special needs students are familiar with the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) process and are adept at working with school personnel to meet the needs of their children. However, now they have not one or two, but possibly six or seven teachers to work with—teachers who don't know their child.

Therefore, we must reassure parents that they have similar support and understanding from the middle school educators—especially during this difficult transition time.

One way to show support and help calm parents' fears is by inviting parents of special needs students to workshops and discussion groups focused specifically on their students' move into middle school and into high school. Many schools and districts schedule special orientation meetings to address these concerns.

For example, the Loudoun County, Virginia, Public Schools hold meetings each spring to address transitions into and out of preschool, kindergarten, middle school, and high school. These presentations, sponsored by the Parent Resource Center, give parents and students an opportunity to hear general information about the nature of the transition for special needs students, become more aware of the resources and support they and their children can receive, and ask questions.

At the middle school level, questions from parents generally fall into three categories: delivery of services, academic and personal development, and socialization and safety. Not only the special education staff, but all teachers and administrators should be aware of these concerns and do what they can to provide information and quell fears and anxiety.



## DELIVERY OF SERVICES

*Whom do I talk to about my child? How can I be sure my child's unique needs are being met?  
How is scheduling different and how does it affect my child?*

Although there are more people to communicate with than at the elementary school level, the process is the same. Be sure parents know who the key players are on the student's team and whom they should contact with questions or concerns.

Responsibility for the student's IEP continues to fall on the case manager. This teacher takes the lead in developing appropriate goals and objectives and for ensuring that everyone at the school who is working with the student is knowledgeable about the agreed-upon goals, services, and accommodations.

It is a good idea for parents to meet with the entire team of teachers so the parents can better understand the teachers' strategies and expectations and so the parents can share their insights about how the student learns best, what upsets the child, what motivates him or her, and how best to communicate about problems as well as progress.

## ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

*How can I help my child become more independent? How can I get used to my child wanting more independence?*

Separation and independence are major components of the middle school transition. Middle school parents need to help their child “let go” of elementary school and its often more personal atmosphere, even when the child has not “let go” of his or her disability. Feeling a greater sense of independence, the special needs student may want parents to be less involved—and this is okay. Parents can maintain their involvement by communicating with staff by phone or email.

Parents may want to request—or teachers may recommend—interim reports each marking period to stay ahead of concerns and difficulties. Parents and teachers can encourage special needs students to take advantage of any after-school homework clubs or teacher review sessions. This may provide the students with a greater sense of independence because they are not asking their parents for help.

Because middle school students may be working with more teachers than in the past and may be required to make several transitions throughout the school day. Students who have difficulties with organizational skills may need additional strategies and/or accommodations to address this disruption—at least initially.



## SOCIALIZATION AND SAFETY

*How can I help my child when other children are picking on him/her? How will I know if my child is not adjusting to the new environment?*

Social interactions with peers become more important for most students during the middle school years. Some students will have too many interactions and others not enough. Parents and teachers should remain in contact as they monitor the student’s first few weeks of school.

Unfortunately, special needs students may be targets of bullying, teasing, or ridicule in the middle school. Often, special needs students do not know how to respond if they are being bullied or teased, nor are they always able to verbalize their feelings.

An atmosphere of tolerance for diversity should, of course, be a mission of all schools, and can be promoted through avenues such as character education programs and discussions about diversity and tolerance. In addition, teachers should be especially attuned to how the general student population reacts to and interacts with special needs students and intervene if necessary.

School guidance counselors can work directly with special needs students to help them interact with their peers. At the same time, parents and teachers should keep communication lines open to get a sense of how the student is feeling about himself or herself, noting signs of withdrawal as well as disruptive behavior.

Parents will rest easier if they know the school is providing extra social support to their child. These supports may include:

- **A lunch buddy program.** Student volunteers eat lunch with special needs students at least during the first several weeks of school.
- **A peer helpers program.** Student volunteers help special needs students find their way around the school for the first two months, ensuring they know where their classes are, helping them with their lockers, and making sure they get on the correct bus at the end of the day.

## COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

Parents of special needs students share the same concerns as parents of every other child who is moving into middle school or high school. Those concerns, however, are often compounded by the fact that their children may have a harder time fitting in than other students or communicating their own fears or anxieties.

The key to promoting a successful transition is keeping the lines of communication open—between parent and child and parent and teacher. The importance of collaboration is no less in middle school and high school as it was in elementary school.

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### Original publication information:

Taylor, C. I. (2002). *But what if: Helping parents of special needs students make the transition. Middle Ground* 6(1), 26-28.