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JSSA'S PARENT GUIDE TO MAJOR SCHOOL TRANSITIONS





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Why This Parent Guide?

**By Jennifer Flajser, JSSA Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor
JSSA Child and Family Services, Fallsgrove, Rockville**

In JSSA's many years of working with children and families, we recognize the value of preparing families to move on to a new level of school. That's why we've asked members of our Child and Family Services department to write the following set of practical "tips" articles addressing every level of educational transition, from entering preschool to leaving for college.

As one school year draws to a close and the next one comes into view, transition and change are on the minds of students, parents, educators and others who work with families. Transitioning to a new level of school (such as preschool to kindergarten or middle school to high school) is often a happy and exciting event. Moving on is a milestone as children gain maturity, look forward to new opportunities and build their skills.

In some cases, children or their parents may feel more anxious than excited about the social, emotional or academic demands of rising to the next level. By nature, transitions bring change. Whether we greet transitions with contentment or concern, adjusting to change can be stressful.

For students, moving on in school requires developing new routines, learning the standards of behavior in a new environment, meeting new people, making friends, finding ways to fit in, and shouldering greater responsibilities and expectations. Mothers and fathers also face transitions as they modify their approaches to keep up with children's evolving attitudes and needs.

We encourage you to use these articles with families in your community, school, or office. You may forward the attached PDF of the entire package, or share this link to our "JSSA Expert Tips & Strategies" web page: <http://www.jssa.org/jssa-expert-tips-strategies>. On that page, readers may click on one or more articles of their choice. You may also wish to refer families to JSSA's home page, www.jssa.org, for broader information about JSSA programs and services they may find beneficial.

We hope these articles will provide coping skills and parenting advice that will help families turn the challenges of transition into opportunities for growth. Should a family need help meeting a child's individual transition needs, JSSA social workers, counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists are available year round to assist.



Preparing to Start Preschool

By Ivy Weitzner, LCSW/LICSW
JSSA Child and Family Services, Northern Virginia

Sending a child to preschool for the first time can be anxiety-provoking for families. Yet with forethought, parents can smooth the transition by helping the child recognize elements of his or her new routine. Here are some tips you can try

- **Preview the routine together.** Before the first day, drive by the building several times. If possible, visit a classroom and ample the playground. Discuss the routine of going there, playing with other children and returning home.
- **Role-play elements of the school day.** You can dress up, be the teacher and have your child practice different school activities.
- **Take the teacher's picture.** At the pre-school open house, take a picture to display at home. Practice the teacher's name with your child prior to the first day.

The First Day

- **Bring along a comfort item** in case he or she is feeling insecure.
- **Explain leaving and returning rituals.** Enter the preschool class with your child. Tell your son or daughter what time you will return, even if the child doesn't really understand time. Give the child a hug and kiss goodbye, then always let him or her watch you leave. It is disconcerting to the child to turn around and find you gone.
- **Stay for five minutes if the child cries.** Tell the child you must leave after five minutes. Keep your anxiety hidden so your child won't pick up the feeling that something is wrong.
- **Arrive early for pick-up.** Wait in the hall near the classroom so that your child can see you as soon as class is over.
- **Be ready in case separation anxiety continues.** Carpooling or walking in with a friend may help. Also, consider taking pictures of your child's classroom and classmates to display and discuss at home.

JSSA helps people of all faiths, races and ethnicities cope with many of life's challenges. For more information how JSSA helps children, teens, parents and families, visit www.jssa.org



Stepping Up from Preschool to Kindergarten

By Wendy Baber, LCSW-C

JSSA Early Childhood Specialist, Fallsgrove, Rockville

Entering kindergarten after a few years in preschool or daycare is a big step. It's an exciting change but also a transition for children and their parents from a familiar preschool routine to a new environment in kindergarten.

One of the most effective ways to ensure a smooth transition is to talk to children in positive ways about kindergarten. In the spring, begin mentioning some of the fun things in store such as meeting new friends, playing on a different playground, and visiting the school library.

Reading children stories about going to kindergarten also helps set a positive tone. The public library will have many good selections about the excitement and fears children often experience.

Parents may feel anxious as their children move on to this new level of school, and unfortunately, their worries can influence children. Encourage parents to be positive when talking about kindergarten. Any time children can hear you or their parents talking about kindergarten, give them reason to be confident by always using positive expressions such as "He's ready!" or "He's going to do great!"

Here are some other ways child care staff can support families in preparing their children and themselves to evolve into "kindergarten families."

- **Encourage families to visit the school.** Kindergarten orientations in the spring are a great time to meet teachers and see the classroom and building. Preschools can print dates of open houses for area schools in a parent newsletter or provide contact information for the public schools so that parents can research this themselves. If families can't attend a kindergarten orientation, you can suggest alternatives. For instance, a family could drive by the school with their child to get a look and then later make arrangements for a brief tour over the summer.

- **Prepare children for new routines.** A kindergartner's day is different than a preschooler's day. A naptime is eliminated, and lunchtime in a cafeteria becomes more filled with distractions. Children may begin to ride buses or walk to school for the first time. With a positive attitude, explain that these changes are coming and emphasize skills like travelling to school safely and opening food and drink packages independently at lunch. Help parents anticipate that when school starts, kindergartners may be very tired and eat little of their lunches. It's all part of adapting to the new routine.
- **Getting to know new schoolmates.** Talk with children about the benefits of making new friends while staying friendly with preschool playmates.
- **Help parents understand kindergarten readiness.** Parents need to approach kindergarten with realistic expectations of their children. Most of the skills children need to be ready are social and emotional skills such as following instructions, taking turns and dealing with other children. Specific reading, writing and number skills will be taught during the year.
- **Prepare parents for new ways to interact with their new school.** For some parents, leaving a carefully chosen preschool environment can feel like a loss. However kindergarten offers many new opportunities to participate in and feel connected to the school -- as a room parent, class party organizer, PTA member, field trip chaperone or volunteer lunchroom monitor, to name a few. Help parents learn about what might be different for them and how they can get involved.

Moving from preschool to kindergarten is a natural part of growing up. Help your students recognize that many exciting new horizons await them in kindergarten. Through the months leading up to the transition, continue helping them think through some of the changes, and the children you teach will build confidence about this new phase in life.

For more information how JSSA helps children, teens, parents and families, visit www.jssa.org.

WENDY BABER'S SUGGESTED BOOK LIST

- *First Day Jitters* by Julie Danneberg
- *I Love You All Day Long* by Francesca Rusackas
- *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn
- *Tomorrow is the First Day of School* by Maureen Macdowell
- *Welcome to Kindergarten* by Anne Rockwell
- *When You Go to Kindergarten* by James Howe
- *The Night Before Kindergarten* by Natasha Wing
- *Kindergarten Rocks!* by Katie Davis
- *Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten* by Joseph Slate



Keeping Calm When Your Child Starts Middle School

By Andrew McGahan, LCSW-C
JSSA Clinical Director, Northern Virginia

The beginning of a new school year marks a major transition in the life of every child. The first two months at middle school can be especially challenging, with stressful educational, social, and personal changes. Shorthand for coping with back-to-school period could be “transition fever,” because change is on the minds of so many students and their families. How can parents best handle transition fever when children start middle school? Here are some tips:

- **Talk openly with your child.** Each child handles transitions differently, so it’s important to discuss the situation to gauge the child’s concerns. Tweens may be concerned about having a teacher with a bad reputation, getting more homework, or mixing with new kids they don’t know from elementary school. The more aware of your child’s feelings you are, the better. Recognize that a child’s feelings may result in some hyperactivity, distractibility, agitation or a change in behavior.
- **Acknowledge higher expectations at school.** From an educational standpoint, middle school is usually a major shift – a larger school building; many teachers instead of just one; switching classes independently; higher expectations to better manage time, materials and work; and a large enough number of students that children may not know everyone in the class. Help your child adapt by providing the structure at home that all children crave, even if he or she seems to fight it. Implement consistent rules about bedtime, homework, and computer or other privileges to keep the child grounded when the school routine is new and different.
- **Expect budding adolescent attitudes.** Tweens are growing into adolescence. During this period of development, they push to become more independent, which may lead to arguments or defiance. The peer group also becomes more important in middle school. During this period, parents need to communicate their expectations to their child clearly and reinforce them with reasonable decisions and consequences.
- **Remember the intense wish to fit in.** Tweens feel pressure to fit in socially. Often they dress alike or wear the same hairstyles as a way to be accepted in groups. However, it is also important at this age for children to start getting

comfortable being themselves. During middle school, parents can encourage their child to choose from the wider array of extracurricular activities many middle schools offer. Meeting students with common interests may make it easier for your child to make friends who accept others for who they are.

- **Narrow the parent-child generation gap.** The social development and pressures on tweens are much more complex than they were a generation ago. Children today feel increased pressure, earlier on, to excel. They have more opportunities and options than their parents did. They also have access to technologies that can continuously engage them almost anywhere they go. Fortunately, parents have ways to learn about these differences – reading books and online articles about this age group, following their children’s assignments with online systems from schools, attending parenting programs, doing some of their own social networking and participating in school listservs. With more knowledge, parents will be better equipped to make appropriate rules that best fit their child’s life.

Academic achievement, social skills development, anxiety and depression issues are among many McGahan and his team of social workers address with middle school children and their families. To learn more about how JSSA can help your family, visit www.jssa.org.



Here Comes High School!

By Andrew McGahan, LCSW-C
JSSA Clinical Director, Northern Virginia

Many pleasures and many new challenges await teens entering high school. They gain more choices for courses and extracurriculars, but may find they are often overwhelmed with the mix of homework and activities. Responding to the growth and maturity that teens experience in high school also often causes parents to seek new ways to guide and manage children effectively. The following tips can help families moving on to high school prepare themselves for this exciting and sometimes puzzling transition.

- **Talk openly with your child.** Each child handles transitions differently, so discuss the situation to gauge the child's concerns. To build trust, listen with an open mind without interrupting. The more aware of your child's feelings you are, the better you can offer support. Informal talks can be productive, such as during car rides, before bed or while working or playing together. Recognize that a child's emotions may result in some distractibility, agitation or a change in behavior. Watch for signs of any persistent changes in eating and sleeping patterns or moods. These may indicate anxiety or depression, and the help of a pediatrician, social worker or psychologist may then be needed.
- **Acknowledge higher expectations at school.** High school brings increased social and academic pressure, and in the competitive Washington area, many teens feel they must excel in all areas of life at once. Help your child adapt by providing the structure at home that all children crave, even if he or she seems to fight it. Rules about curfew, Internet use, study routines and other key matters create this structure. Encourage your child to use good organizational strategies and to develop good study habits. Adolescents are gaining reflective thinking skills, and they do increase their questioning of parental rules. Be prepared to discuss rules with your child and give reasons to back up your decisions. Keep messages about rules and behavior concise. And remember, no matter how much they disagree with you, you are still the rule maker.
- **Expect adolescent attitudes.** It is normal for teens to push to become more independent, which may lead to arguments or defiance. Parents need to communicate their expectations to their child clearly and reinforce them with reasonable decisions and consequences. The peer group may seem much more important to a teen than parents and family do, though your children honestly do need your love and attention as much as they ever did. They want you to

really listen to them, to stay calm when they confide in you, and to begin talking with them about more mature subjects such as world events.

- **Remember the intense wish to fit in.** Students in high school remain concerned about finding their place in the social scene. Peer pressure is also more intense and can include experimentation with drugs, alcohol and other risks. Get to know your child's new friends and their parents so you can monitor who is influencing your teen. If your child is having difficulty meeting new people, encourage him or her to sample clubs, sports or activities in high school, where it may be easier to find others with common interests.
- **Narrow the parent-child generation gap.** Social development among adolescents is much more complex than a generation ago. Teens today have more opportunities and options than their parents did. Social media gives them the ability to connect and communicate constantly, wherever they go. To narrow the generation gap, learn all you can about social media and its advantages and disadvantages for your teen. Recognize that you are most likely raising a natural multitasker. Familiarize yourself with popular names and trends in music, television and Web media to better understand the cultural messages your child is receiving. Informed and aware, parents will be better equipped to make appropriate rules that best fit their own child's life.

Adapting to high school isn't always easy for adolescents, and neither is learning to parent a teenager. Children need to be allowed to experiment with succeeding or failing on their own, while parents offer support and guidance. JSSA is experienced in helping children, adolescents, parents and families navigate through these and other transitions in life. To learn more about how JSSA can help your family, visit www.jssa.org.



Spotting Stress in the Freshman Countdown to College

**By Debbie Goldstein, LCSW-C
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This year's graduating high school seniors have received their college acceptance letters. They've conquered college essays and financial aid applications. Prom and graduation are imminent, and then seniors will soon become college freshmen. Ah, the freedom of all that independence. Right?

Right, but not without the concerns and doubts that naturally accompany what for most college-bound students is the biggest life transition yet— leaving home. The experience can bring stress through the spring and summer even though students genuinely do want to go away to school.

Incoming freshmen anticipate many new experiences while they are for the first time physically and emotionally separated from their parents. Though friends may seem of most interest to this age group, parents remain the most important influence on the child. Making decisions about spending money, managing time and handling other necessities of life after living 12 years of highly structured lives at home can intimidate these young adults.

With the economic downturn, family financial considerations may also cause anxiety or insecurity for some students. Others may feel more pressure to succeed academically to justify the high cost of their education.

Be on the lookout for these signs a child may feel stress about departing for college:

- Irrational or out-of-character behavior that may reflect a teen's anxieties such as temporary crying jags or belligerence
- Physical symptoms of stress such as headaches or stomach aches
- A severe "senior slump" academically, perhaps indicating doubts about the decision to attend a distant or demanding college
- Intense summer romances which transfer love and loyalty to a new relationship and away from the family. These relationships distract students from having to leave home in the fall.
- Children who pay less attention to friends and start clinging more to their parents

Some students may be comfortable talking over concerns about the impending transition with parents. However, speaking to a mental health professional instead may give others a welcome feeling of independence.

Once the fall semester begins, parents should let their children function as independently as possible. It's still a good idea, though, for parents to research the college's academic support center, its health center, and guidance and counseling services. Then later, if necessary, parents can help students set these supports in place.

Sometimes parents harbor anxieties of their own about sending a child away to school. However if your child detects your worries, he may feel guilty about leaving for what is actually an appropriate transition. The best way for parents to cope with their own feelings is to discuss them privately with other trusted adults, whether friends, family or professionals such as social workers or psychologists. Then when the departure time comes, you can give your child the simple and clear message, "I am going to miss you," accompanied by a big hug.

JSSA assists families through diverse life transitions and challenges. To learn more about how JSSA may be able to help your family, visit www.jssa.org.

About JSSA

JSSA has been helping people across the Washington metropolitan area meet emotional, social, and physical challenges for more than 118 years. A nonsectarian provider, we serve people of all religious backgrounds, races and ethnicities, helping the youngest child to the most fragile senior, from individuals to entire families. Our wide range of counseling, educational, employment, in-home support, hospice and nursing care and social services assist over 29,500 people per year.

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