Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

Supporting children's transition to secondary school

Guidance for parents and carers



Preparing for secondary school

The transition from primary to secondary school is exciting for children and marks a new phase in their lives. Children recognise it as part of growing up and are aware that their lives are about to change in an important way. Like any change, it can also bring uncertainty.

Most children will manage the transition to secondary school successfully. However, there may be ups and downs. It's easy for children to slip from feeling happy and confident one minute, to feeling nervous or anxious and back again as they find their feet.

As a parent or carer there is much you can do to help your child through the transition period with careful and sensitive preparation.



Adapting to change

The move from primary to secondary school comes at a time of great change for children. As well as adapting to their new school environment and developing new relationships, they are dealing with the physical and psychological changes that the start of adolescence brings.

All children are different and the move to a new school, or even moving to a new part of a school, may affect each of them in distinct and sometimes unexpected ways. Some respond well to change, and will feel ready for the move, while others will need more reassurance and preparation. Sometimes children who have enjoyed primary school and are expected to make a smooth transition may unexpectedly struggle with the change.

Most children adapt to secondary school well. However, if your child struggles with their new environment, it can be stressful not only to them, but for you as parents and carers, too. It's important to take this into account as you help your child prepare for secondary school.

Even without the disruption caused by a pandemic the move to secondary school is full of unknowns. But coronavirus has caused additional disruption. Schools may not have been able to put the usual preparations for transitions in place.

Why is transition difficult for some children and young people?

Transition can be challenging for a number of reasons. For example, some children may worry about making new friends. Others may have concerns around organisation and understanding new systems – being in a larger environment, knowing that they have different lessons in different classrooms, or having more homework to do. Children in primary school are generally used to having one teacher most of the time. Changing to having multiple teachers, who will have high expectations and additional classroom rules may feel daunting, especially if they have formed close bonds with their primary school teachers.



What can parents and carers do to support children and young people through transition?

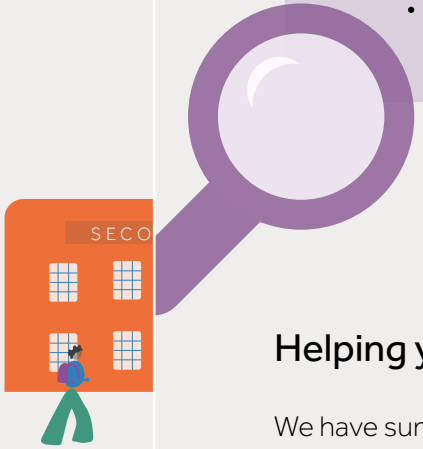
As a parent or carer, you will probably have walked your child to their primary school and come to know other parents. You might have had the chance to chat to your child's teacher at pick up to discuss any concerns you or they have. Secondary school is different for parents and carers as well as children. School staff recognise this, and many include thorough inductions for families, introducing them to pastoral care and the systems and support the school provides. Taking advantage of this can be helpful in getting to know your way around secondary school.



What does successful transition look like?

How can you tell whether your child is settling in well at secondary school? Research shows that the signs of a successful transition are as follows:

- developing new friendships and maintaining good self-esteem and confidence;
- showing an increasing interest in school and school work;
- getting used to their new routines and school organisation with ease;
- experiencing continuity in learning.



Helping your child through transition

We have summarised four ways to support your child through their transition. They are:

- encouraging them to explore their feelings;
- helping them connect to their school;
- building friendships and relationships;
- empowering them by building their confidence and independence.

Exploring

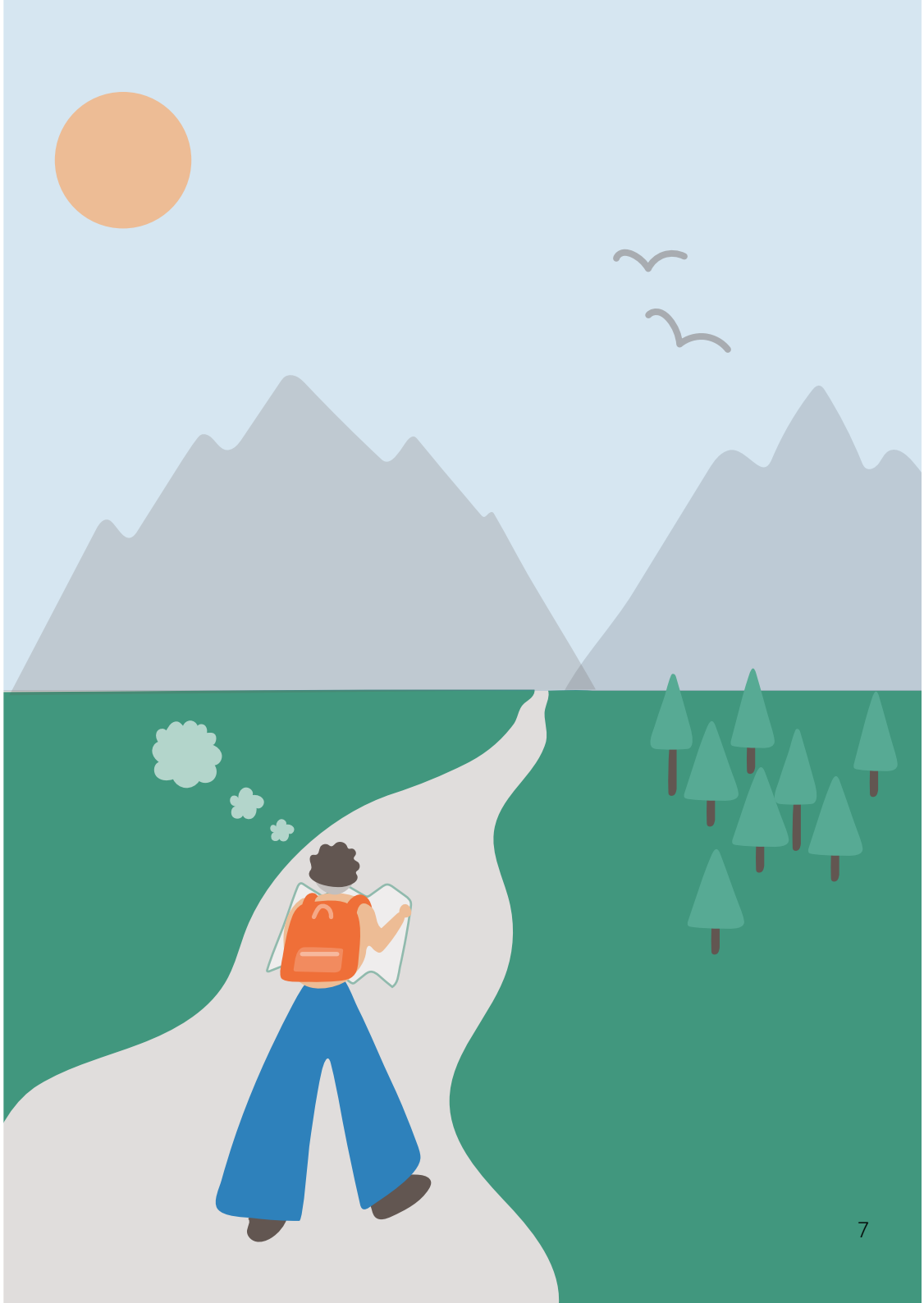
The most valuable thing you can do to support your child is encourage them to explore their thoughts and to know that they can talk openly about their feelings, both positive and negative. Conversations can help pave the way to talking about your child's emotions as they prepare for their new school.

- Make sure you mark the end of your child's primary school experience. Saying proper goodbyes to friends, teachers and other school staff is important. Talk about any favourite memories from primary school and recognise all the things they will miss.

- Keep talking openly to your child to ask any questions they might have, and explore any worries and/or possible misunderstandings about starting a new school.

- Discuss with your child what they are looking forward to, and whether they are worried about anything. It can be helpful to think about how you felt when you were preparing for secondary school and share this with your child - children always like to hear stories about their parents' or carers' childhood. Were you excited about meeting new people and learning new subjects? How did you settle in? Your experiences may give you clues about how your child is feeling.

- Find out what your child's primary school has been doing to support the transition with year 6's. Continue the conversation at home with your child or encourage conversations with older siblings, older cousins or anyone the child feels comfortable with.



Connecting

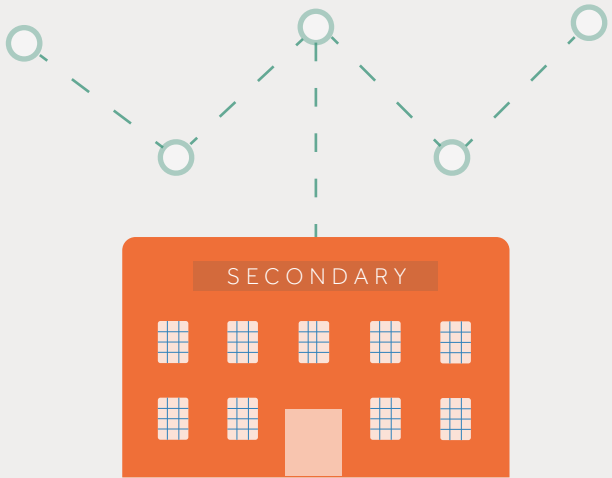
Feeling connected with their new school is important and will help your child settle in.

- Help your child begin to connect with their new school. Look at the school website with your child and take part in any induction events, in person or virtual. Many schools have recorded video content for year 6/7 pupils and it can be helpful for children to watch this to help them feel comfortable.

- Take the opportunity to meet any key members of staff and get to know how best to communicate with the school. It may be beneficial for you and your child to identify a teacher or other trusted adult at the school (for example a Form Tutor or Head of Year), who can be a first point of contact for any worries.

- Help your child plan out their journey to school. It may be their first time traveling to school alone and so practicing the journey can be an important part of preparing them.

- If your child is struggling with their new school (after a few weeks), get in touch with the school to discuss your concerns.



Building friendships and relationships

Whether your child is going to a school where a lot of their friends are going, or they are going to a school where they do not know anyone it's important to start talking about friendships.

- Help your child think about how to approach meeting new people and starting conversations. Remind them that all children in their year are in the same situation. You might want to do some role plays to practice this at home.

- It can be helpful to encourage children to join some extracurricular activities at their new school as another way of meeting like-minded young people.

- If possible, plan activities over the summer holidays which allow your children to meet up with others.

Empowering your child

Building your child's independence and confidence will help them with the transition.

- Empower and support them to take steps towards independence however big or small, as well as taking on small responsibilities in the home to build up their confidence and independence in preparation for this new and exciting phase of their life.

- Give your child lots of praise where you can and notice the things that they are doing well.

The greatest source of strength for any child going through change is knowing that they can fall back on the love and support of their parents and carers. Providing stability and security is what you do best, and this gives children the confidence to explore and test their new environment and seek out new experiences. It means that transition can be an exciting and positive experience and that if there are any wobbles on the way, they can come to you for reassurance and help.

Remember, too, that you don't have to have all the answers and that you don't have to do this on your own. Your school is there to help and between you, school staff and your child you have all the skills and resources you need to help your child make a successful transition.



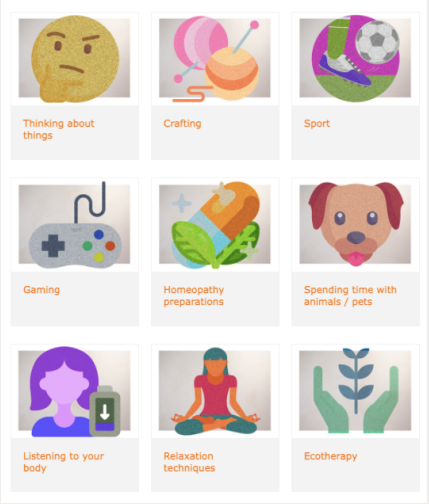
Use our supportive resources

Moving up!



Our Moving Up! animation and accompanying resources have been developed to support pupils to feel less anxious about the move to secondary school, to open up discussions about potential worries, and to help find solutions during periods of change.

This resource is suitable for pupils who are preparing to transition to secondary school, and pupils who have recently started Year 7. Although designed to be used in a school setting, the animation can also be used at home, and the materials can be adapted if helpful.



Self-care

It is also important to highlight the importance of self-care to children and young people, and the need to look after our own mental health.

There are a number of self-care strategies for young people to try out on our website, as well as other supportive resources for you on our parents and carers pages.

Mentally Healthy Schools

Our Mentally Healthy Schools site has compiled quality-assured resources aimed at supporting parents and carers with their child's transition.

You can find these resources here.



Schools in Mind

Schools in Mind is a free network for education professionals which shares practical, academic and clinical expertise about mental health and wellbeing in schools and FE colleges.

The network aims to translate research into practice by providing evidence-based, accessible information and resources that can be used to embed good mental health across the whole school community.

Join our free Schools in Mind network today.

References

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3. Evangelou M, Taggart B, Sylva K, Melhuish E, Sammons P, Siraj-Blatchford I. Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education 3-14 Project: What Makes a Successful Transition from Primary to Secondary School? DCSF Publ. Published online 2008.

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