

Ready for the next step

Children are more likely to embrace the challenges of secondary school if they know what to expect. Márianna Csóti explains how best to prepare them for the transition.

Whether children make the transition from primary to secondary school in Year 6 or in Year 7, they will still experience a culture shock. Despite having been in the school system for a number of years, children will have only learned the rules and expectations associated with their particular school. And, although some things do remain the same, secondary school can still appear a bewildering and hostile place to be.

Teachers can help children make this change so that they can enjoy, and experience achievement in, their new school and take advantage of a fresh start or a new challenge.

The differences

Ask children to state the differences they think they will find when they get to secondary school. Write all these suggestions on a board in full view. When the children can think of no more differences, discuss each point in turn – and any additional points they may have missed. Some differences are given below.

Secondary schools are much bigger than primary schools. Some secondary schools have as many as 2000 pupils on role. This will be a daunting number for children to cope with if they are used to a small village school with only 300 or so on role.

There can be over 100 teachers in the school so it will take time for newly arrived children to recognise even some of the staff from a taster visit. Likewise not all the staff will know the children.

There is likely to be more than one building. Some secondary schools have several buildings or a couple of main buildings plus mobile classrooms.

The buildings will probably have more than one floor – however, modern specialist schools may be on one level to allow unrestricted disabled access.

Children will have to learn the routes from each class to the next and find out where the loos, dining hall and assembly hall are. It helps if the children have visited the school before.

The school may have a split site: usually the older children and the staff ‘commute’ while the younger children stay on the same site. New children may be based in the lower school for 3 years before they move on to the upper school.

There will probably be a majority of male staff: the children may never have had a man teach them before.

Children will be split into form groups and will have the same form teacher for the whole year or longer. Generally the children in particular forms stay the same.

Registration takes place during form time - in the room allocated to their group - often before classes, after lunch or both. When registration does not take place in the form room in the mornings, the subject teacher will check their presence. Some schools ask teachers to take a class register at the start of every lesson and to enter the details on a computer connected to the school office to reduce truanting.

Assembly may be in the morning or in the afternoon. If form time registration takes place in the afternoons only, assembly will follow that.

There may not be assembly every day: some schools have only one assembly hall, which might not be big enough to fit the whole school in together. So certain years may be grouped to have assembly, say, twice a week.

Problems children have may be dealt with by the form teacher and/or Head of Year or a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator. Only major problems get taken to the Headteacher. In primary schools, Headteachers can be involved from the start.

Form teachers don't take in dinner money. Children pay at the canteen where they get their lunch, buy dinner vouchers from the secretary to redeem at lunchtime or have a swipe card that parents top up from time to time.

Children have sole responsibility for what they choose to eat at the canteen if they pay for the items they choose, rather than using a voucher system that buys a complete lunch.

There won't be dinner helpers as there are in primary schools. Secondary school children are expected to be able to cut their own food and not need encouragement to eat up.

Children are expected to move from class to class between lessons instead of the teacher coming to them. For example, maths will be taught in the maths block and science in the science block. Time between lessons can be very busy as hundreds of children are on the move.

Some teachers may move classrooms or laboratories too to share certain facilities with other members of the department. So children will need to put rooms as well as subjects on their timetable so that they know where to go for each lesson.

Not all lessons are taught using form groupings. Maths and English may be banded, for example, so that the children are grouped with others of similar ability.

The children will no longer be at the top of the school but the bottom age wise. The older children will be much bigger and may seem intimidating – which can make some children feel overwhelmed.

If the school has a sixth form, there may be prefects. Prefects help teachers with gate and break duties and they may help organise the queues at lunchtimes.

The children might only know a small number of other children in the school as secondary schools can have many primary feeder schools. To help them settle they should be grouped in forms with at least one close friend: feeder schools are split equally across the forms for a good mix.

There may be strict rules about how to walk down corridors and up and down stairs, such as always keeping to the left and never running.

As well as new school rules, each class teacher might have their own particular rules. This means that children will have a great deal of new information to remember. All rules should be made clear to them.

Children will probably be given a homework timetable showing on which days they will be given homework for which subjects - and a homework diary where they have to write down their homework. Parents are expected to sign this at the end of each week. Probably only 20 to 30 minutes of homework is given for each double lesson children have in Year 7, and they should be given more than one night in which to complete it.

Children will not have a tray in which to keep their work. They will have to carry all their books etc around with them. However, some schools do provide lockers.

Children must check their timetable to make sure they have the right books for the right day and adequate writing equipment. Secondary school teachers do not stock spare pens and pencils etc and children will get into trouble if they do not have writing equipment with them.

Children will have more subjects to learn, many of which they may not have heard about before. This can be exciting as it opens up new areas of interest.

Children will not be allowed to go to the toilet during lessons unless they have a medical problem. They must make sure they go at break time.

During class, children will be expected to stay seated while putting up their hand to ask a question rather than walking up to the teacher. Shouting out is not allowed: children must wait to be invited to speak.

Children will be expected to know where to start each day's work in their book and how to lay it out.

Children will be expected to listen, understand and remember safety rules of the environment they are in. For example, in science lessons children are expected to wear safety goggles and tie back long hair whenever Bunsen burners are used. They will also need to remember never to run in a laboratory and to always tuck their bags under the bench or table so that they don't trip someone up.

There may be many lunchtime and after school clubs to join, which could be fun.

The school may have a homework club where children can go to do homework in an atmosphere of quiet; there may be someone on hand to help them.

There will be regular testing in school in most of their subjects.

Children may witness much more undesirable behaviour than they did in primary school.

The similarities

Ask children to state the similarities between the two types of schooling and write their suggestions on a board in full view. Discuss each point in turn – and any additional points they may have missed. Some similarities are given below.

The school day will be organised by the sounding of bells. But teachers won't ring a hand bell and the children don't line up outside, they just go to the next lesson.

Children are still expected to go outside or sit in cloakrooms - if it is raining - at break times.

There will always be a member of staff on duty at break times and lunchtimes should there be a problem.

Reports will be sent home - but perhaps twice a year instead of once.

There will be a parents' evening for parents to find out how their children are doing. But instead of seeing one teacher for all subjects, parents will need to see each subject teacher and may not need to see the form teacher at all unless there's a specific problem they want to discuss.

Registration takes place twice a day. The differences in how this happens were discussed earlier.

Ideas for helping with the transition

Give the children a plan of the secondary school buildings. After looking over it, ask them, for example, 'If you had a science lesson, which block should you go to?' and, 'If you are in Block C, which blocks will you need to pass to get to the gym?'

Get a timetable from the secondary school and represent it pictorially if the children would find it helpful. Ask the children what things they might need for each lesson generally – such as a pen, pencil, ruler and rubber. Ask what lessons need other equipment. For example, for maths lessons children may need a calculator and a protractor. For games lessons they will need their PE kit and trainers. Find out from the school what is required.

Put a large clock in full view. Put the hour and minute hands to the time of the first bell of the day and ask the children where they should go. Run through a whole school day using the clock while the children use the timetable and the school plan to help them decide what action needs to be taken.

Ask for photographs of the most important people the children need to know at secondary school so that the children can learn to recognise them before they start. These can include the Headteacher, a school secretary, the form teacher and the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator.

Discuss what kind of bag the children will need to buy to carry their school books and equipment. Art books may be as large as A4 and they may have five subjects a day so will

need plenty of room for carrying their books and PE kit. If the bag has two main compartments, the children could put their packed lunch in one section and their books in the other. Having a drinks pocket helps prevent leakage onto school books – or they could put the bottle in a re-sealable freezer bag.

Change class expectations. Ask the children to remain seated while raising their hands to ask a question, to decide for themselves where to start the day's work and how to lay it out and to remember to put the day's date in their books without being prompted. They should remember to go to the loo at break-times.

Ask the children what worries they have about starting secondary school. Through discussion, children can be reassured that it is perfectly normal to have feelings of apprehension as well as excitement; then they can appreciate that they are not the only ones feeling like this. Understanding that school will feel strange for a while can also help make them be patient for the time when they will feel a greater sense of belonging. Tell children to be wary of 'horror' stories other children tell about the school they will be going to; the stories may be wholly untrue or may have been adapted to make more impact.

Get a copy of the secondary school's rules and read through them with the children. Knowing what the school expects of them helps children be less nervous and they will be less likely to get into trouble over something they should have known about.

Get a copy of the school's anti-bullying policy and explain it to the children to help allay fears of being bullied and to deter those who may indulge in bullying.

Tell the children to practise travelling to the secondary school several times, especially if they are using public transport for the first time. They need to know the times of the buses or trains after their usual one in case it is cancelled or they miss it. The times should be written down and carried in a pocket of their school bag – with some emergency money in case they lose their fare.

The Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator in the secondary school will need to have full details of particular needs individual children have before the move so that help is in place when term starts.

The transition to secondary school should be viewed with excitement. Impress upon the children to make the most of the opportunity for a fresh start with new teachers and new subjects. And can they think of a personal statement that will help them make the most of themselves? A motto my daughter's school has is, 'Be the best that you can be' – what more can we ask of children?

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