

7 Ways to Help Kids Start Middle School When They're Rarely in the Building

Bridging the transition between elementary and middle school is always important—but this year's strategies will require some rethinking.

[Sarah Gonser](#) August 14, 2020



Online Learning

The transition to middle school is a high-stakes shift for

many young teens. It comes at a time when they're experiencing brisk cognitive growth as neural pathways associated with social connections and identity kick into high gear, making them more sensitive to how others perceive them and how, in turn, they interact with their peers. Indeed, belonging to a peer group is a deep-seated need—comparable to the need for food, according to [some studies](#)—just as kids arrive at their new middle schools. When that transition isn't sufficiently supported by thoughtfully developed and consistent strategies that address kids' anxieties and ease their fears about fitting in, the [research](#) shows that kids suffer both socially and academically, and their risk of dropping out only a few years later, when they reach high school, increases dramatically.

The good news is that other research shows that the impact of the disruption can be alleviated. A 2019 [study](#) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that when researchers used a targeted "belonging intervention"—they had new sixth-grade students read stories about older middle schoolers describing their own fears and anxieties, and their eventual success at fitting in, and then had the sixth graders write about what they learned—grades, attendance, and behavior among the new students showed marked improvements. The exercise, writes study co-author Geoffrey D. Borman, "taught students that middle school adversity is common, short-lived, and due to external,

temporary causes rather than personal inadequacies." And when transition efforts extend throughout the school year, and involve collaboration among teachers, families, and students, the impact on kids can be truly significant, according to a position paper by the [Association for Middle Level Education](#).

With schools set to begin the school year remotely, or with a hybrid schedule combining distance and in-person instruction, transition strategies will be harder to implement—and they'll require some rethinking—but for young adolescents they remain indispensable.

We spoke with middle school teachers, and other experts, about their top strategies for helping kids forge connections at this very vulnerable age—and under difficult, remote circumstances.

If You Can, Reach Out to Every Student

The importance of connecting with every child was brought into stark relief in the spring when schools abruptly closed due to the pandemic, cutting off millions of children from the vital lifeline of school. As many young teens hurtle towards a school year that may start remotely, schools should try to establish systems to reach out to every child. That might feel like a heavy lift, so try a staggered approach. "Keep a spreadsheet, so you're connecting to all

kids, and share it with your colleagues so you're not doubling efforts," says Sarah Farr, a sixth-grade social studies teacher in the metro-Atlanta area. "When you can't see all your kids, it's much easier to lose track. It's so much harder when they're online. Reach out to offer pep talks, to check in, or in recognition of good work."

In the Phoenix Union High School District, superintendent Chad Gestson came up with a way to connect with every student in his district when schools closed last year.

Through the Every Students, Every Day initiative, educators and school staff reached out each day to the district's 30,000 students—90 percent of whom live at or below the federal poverty line. "Staff established the expectations, developed protocols to protect privacy, and prepared a script for the check-ins," Gestson wrote for [The 74](#). Each adult in the district is armed with a list of questions, including "How are you?" and "Do you need food?" and a list of 10 kids to contact daily. Notes and concerns are entered into a central database so students' schools can arrange for interventions.

Make Social Connection Your First Priority

The strength of your relationships with your students will be a key determinant of their success academically, and this year your social and emotional work will be harder—and pay

off more for your students.

In the first weeks, focus on “emotional safety and getting-to-know-you questions,” says Phyllis L. Fagell, a school counselor in Washington D.C. and author of *Middle School Matters*. For example, at the beginning of an online class, queue up students in a virtual “waiting room”—you can often find this feature in the settings of a tool like Zoom—so you can admit and greet each child by name, says Farr. It takes a bit longer but it’s an important step when you can’t connect with kids face-to-face. Alternately, to underscore that [each child is valued](#), begin virtual lessons by briefly taking emotional temperatures—kids can select emojis to signal their mood—and then crowdsource strategies for how to feel better, suggests Fagell. Opening up discussions to the wider group about how kids are feeling—while respecting students’ privacy and not focusing the discussion on any one student—helps “normalize the highs and lows that are typical for this age range,” says Fagell, and helps seed connections among classmates.

Invite kids to be small-group leaders with “teacher-designed discussions” that eventually transition to conversations planned and led by rotating small-group student leaders. This leadership opportunity raises confidence and feelings of belonging, which are essential components of wellbeing,” says Bintliff.

Use Bitmojis to Build Relationships

Eighth-grade teacher Amanda Wells plans to ask her students to complete an [All About our Class](#) Bitmoji assignment in which students will create their own mini-me style avatars and fill out her templated Google slide, sharing a few sentences about their interests.

You can get started with Bitmoji by downloading the [app](#) and selecting your Bitmoji's physical features. Download the [Google Chrome extension](#) so you can copy and paste a favorite image of your Bitmoji into different formats for your virtual classroom. There are lots of templates and tutorials online, such as [Bitmoji Craze for Educators](#), or search for [video tutorials](#) about setting up your Bitmoji classroom. You can read our own recent coverage of Bitmoji classrooms [here](#).

Create Video Tours

Where incoming sixth-grade students might, under normal circumstances, be able to attend events designed to smooth the transition to a new school—how to navigate school corridors and still make it to class on time, or handle locker breaks and new bell schedules, for example—the pandemic precludes many of these in-person events. That's where video tours come into play.

“Send incoming students a video tour of your school,” suggests high school English teacher Michelle Maze Cunningham via Facebook. If these introductory videos can feature students in the upper grades as tour guides, even better. Her school is creating a “Minecraft layout of the school for students to play in and around the building.” Beyond conveying the basics, videos like these can provide incoming students with a sneak preview that can reassure them and prime them to feel more socially competent, while also conveying critical new health and safety protocols: “you’ll be wearing a mask all day,” for example, or “here’s how to move between classes to allow for social distancing.”

Pair New Students with Older Students

Pair incoming sixth-grade students with willing upper-grade students. “Have older kids call, email, or videoconference incoming students to welcome them to school and tell them about the experience,” says Maze Cunningham. This can be a one-time communication to answer questions before the school year kicks off, or an ongoing effort. Once the school year gets underway, “if someone needs a little extra support, you could ask for eighth-grade volunteers to be on-call as buddies for kids who need more mentoring support. Adults in the building can do this too,” Fagell suggests.

You can also ask older students to write letters to incoming students, using templates like [this one](#), for example, sharing how they initially struggled, sought help, and eventually found their academic and social footing—as inspired by the University of Wisconsin-Madison study referenced in the introduction to this article. The researchers in that study, Geoffrey Borman and Jaymes Pyne, noted students who participated experienced both academic and mindset improvements. “Teenagers are often more attentive to the advice of a peer, and, therefore, we believe that the messages that are delivered by our intervention are powerful because they come from the stories of other students,” Borman told [Time](#).

Involve Kids in Creating Rules for Your Virtual Classroom

When teachers include kids in developing classroom rules, asking them to participate in “developing clear behavioral guidelines that students see as adding quality to their school lives,” [writes Jonathan C. Erwin](#), author of *The Classroom of Choice*, the relationship between students and teachers benefits. “What’s more, students will be much less likely to disrupt the learning environment, which in turn increases the likelihood that students will achieve quality work,” Erwin adds.

In a virtual classroom, teachers can expand the practice by incorporating discussions around questions such as, “When do you feel you belong in school?” and “How can we create feelings of connection during remote learning?” writes Amy Vatne Bintliff, assistant teaching professor at UC San Diego’s Department of Education Studies and a former middle and high school ELA teacher. She suggests supplementing a first-week online chat on the topic with an anonymous survey so that students feel comfortable being honest. “Moderate the discussion and build student answers into your class agreements and norms. Use student answers to create new opportunities within your curriculum,” she says.

Consider Online Extracurriculars

Extracurriculars—art classes, debate club meetings, model U.N, sports—can provide another arena for connecting new students to the middle school community. These “peripheral spaces” are powerful opportunities for students to become “actively engaged,” learn from peers, work together, and take on leadership roles, according to [Jal Mehta, from Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, and Sarah Fine, a lecturer in education studies at UC San Diego](#), authors of the book *In Search of Deeper Learning*.

Though traditional extracurricular days—where school

coaches, club sponsors, and other after-school representatives share information about their organizations—might be canceled due to health and safety concerns, some of these events can move online. Be sure that everyone, including kids with less developed social skills, can be included, notes Fagell. And extracurricular options don't need to be formal, she adds—something as simple as meeting for lunch one day a week, advisory meetings, or game nights, can help kids feel more connected without the presence of so much academic pressure.