Leap to middle school is hard, but can be a fresh start for socially anxious children

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For young people, the transition from elementary to middle school can

be a time of stress, disruption and discomfort. For children who already have trouble interacting with their peers, the transition can be particularly fraught.

In a study published online earlier this year in the *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, Florida State University developmental psychologist Heidi Gazelle investigated the middle school transition and outlined why this specific period of change can be pivotal in the lives of children identified as "anxious solitary."

Gazelle, an associate professor in the College of Human Sciences, discusses her study below, explaining why different socially anxious youth seem to diverge into separate developmental trajectories during the middle school transition and which strategies can help ensure children are prepared to adjust and flourish.

How do scholars define the term anxious solitary?

The everyday word most people would use to describe anxious solitude would be "shy." We conceptualize anxious solitary children as feeling so anxious around other children that they often remain alone. They want to play with other children, but they're held back by social anxiety. Their anxiety is driven by concerns about how other children might treat them or whether they'll perform well socially.

If you're watching children play at recess, you will see some children watching other children play. That shows they're interested, but they aren't joining in. All children do that occasionally, but children who we identify as anxious solitary do that at a much higher rate than their peers.

Sometimes we identify them based on observing them at recess, other times we identify them by asking peers. For instance, we ask peers about which kids watch others without joining in or which kids are shy and

don't have much to say.

Why was the middle school transition of specific interest to you and your team?

Developmental psychologists usually think of the middle school transition as a stressful time. When children in the United States transition to middle school, it's usually into a bigger context. In elementary school they've traditionally spent the school day in one classroom, whereas in middle school they're in many different classrooms with multiple teachers and multiple sets of peers throughout the day. They have to re-establish their place socially.

Although it's generally framed as a time that's stressful, we wondered whether some children actually benefit from this transition and form better relationships than they had in elementary school.

According to your research, in what ways can the middle school transition catalyze changes in anxious solitary behavior?

We found that not all children follow the same pathway over time. Children who show a pathway of anxious solitude in elementary school are more likely to show elevated anxious solitude in middle school as well. We often see that past behavior predicts future behavior, but that's not always the case.

Some children who demonstrated anxious solitude in elementary school showed declining levels of anxious solitude over time and looked like they had more positive social relationships in middle school. I find very robust relations throughout my research between being anxious solitary and being excluded by peers. Most of the time it's passive exclusion,

where other kids don't approach an anxious solitary child or don't invite them to join in. For those anxious solitary children who improved, we found declining patterns of peer exclusion in middle school.

Another fascinating pattern that predicted decline in anxious solitude after the middle school transition was children being better able to defend themselves. We don't know how children became better able to defend themselves. It might be that they found ways to integrate themselves more effectively with others or found children they got along with better in middle school. It's possible they also responded to challenging peer situations better.

After a school transition, children are usually interested in making new friends, and social reorganization occurs as a result. Children initiate contact, say hello and get to know new children. In that context, our data suggests there can be an opportunity for a fresh start.

What would your advice be to a parent of an anxious solitary child about to begin middle school?

The first thing I would say is that we see a lot of heterogeneity in anxious solitary children, so the main thing to pay attention to is if your child is fitting in socially and has friends. We find that many anxious solitary children do fit in and make friends, and we have a lot of evidence that tells us that's very important to their healthy development. But other anxious solitary children struggle more and experience peer exclusion.

There are things parents can do to help with the transition. It's important to think about the child's readiness to take advantage of the opportunities that come with a new environment. It would help to increase the child's familiarity with the new school and provide them opportunities to meet future classmates beforehand if possible.

For instance, some middle schools provide summer camp for incoming sixth-graders. Attending summer camp is intended to improve children's readiness to respond well to the transition by increasing their familiarity with the new environment and new routines and helping them initiate relationships with new classmates and teachers.

Parents should also talk with their child about how they're feeling and who they hang out with and help them problem solve when they encounter difficulties. The transition to middle school can be stressful, but it can also be an opportunity for positive change.

More information: Heidi Gazelle et al. Multiple Trajectories in Anxious Solitary Youths: the Middle School Transition as a Turning Point in Development, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* (2019). DOI: 10.1007/s10802-019-00523-8

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