Original article

# How Does Support From Peers Compare With Support From Adults as Students Transition to Secondary School?

Stacey Waters, Ph.D. *, Leanne Lester, Ph.D., and Donna Cross, Ed.D.

*Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan University, Mount Lawley, Western Australia, Australia*

A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** Understanding how young people navigate the transition from primary to secondary school is critical for preventing the adverse mental health, social, and academic outcomes associated with a difficult transition. This study sought to determine from whom young people receive support before the transition period to help inform the development of future intervention research testing, as well as peer, school, and family-based supports during transition.
**Methods:** Data were collected from 1,974 primary school students prior to the transition and again in Term 1 of the first year of secondary school. Students were asked about their expectation of the transition as well as their support from peers, family, and the school. Just over half (52%) of the sample were females with a mean age of 12 years.
**Results:** Peer, school, and family supports all predicted positive student transition experiences. When in Grade 7 and considering all predictors together, a high level of perceived peer support was the most significant predictor of an expectation of an easy or somewhat easy transition. In Grade 8, again after considering all sources of support, parental presence was the most significant protective predictor of an easy or somewhat easy transition experience.
**Conclusions:** Students who expect and experience a positive transition to secondary school are generally well-supported by their peers, school, and family. The most stable influence for young people over the transition period is the presence of families before and after school and future intervention efforts to support young people during transition need to build support from families.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This paper examines the sources of support adolescents receive from peers, school, and families in primary school and their impact on transition. Future interventions to support young people's transition should begin in primary school and build positive peer relationships while empowering parents to support their adolescent through the transition.

There remains a lot to be learned about how young people make successful transitions from primary to secondary school and how they are supported during this time. Does the "here and now" of peers provide the greatest support for students before and after transition, or do the connections with teachers and the school as a whole predict successful secondary school transition? And what role do parents have in helping and supporting their children through this important time? In this period of great physical, social, and emotional development for adolescents, the change in school and friendship groups adds another layer of complexity. To aid future interventions, this paper seeks to explore the role of teachers, peers, families, and school in preparing and supporting young people through the transition to secondary school.

The literature clearly articulates the negative outcomes for young people who experience a poor transition to secondary school. These students are more likely to report emotional problems, feelings of depression and anxiety, and greater use of antisocial behaviors [1–8]. Limited international longitudinal evidence suggests some of these emotional health problems continue beyond the initial transition period, including elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and poorer well-being [6,7]. Our recently reported 1-year prospective study involving 1,500

* Address correspondence to: Stacey Waters, Ph.D., Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan University, 2 Bradford Street, Mount Lawley, Western Australia 6050, Australia.
E-mail address: s.waters@ecu.edu.au (S. Waters).

Australian Grade 8 secondary school students found that 31% of students in the sample experienced a "difficult" or "somewhat difficult" transition to their new school [8]. This third of the student sample were more likely to experience poorer social and emotional health, including higher levels of depression and anxiety at the end of their first year of secondary school.

The problems relating to transition from primary to secondary school are not new and are linked to two main factors, the change in school context and with that, the change in friendships. In Western Australia the transition from primary (Grade 7, age 12 years) to secondary school (Grade 8, age 13 years) signifies a considerable period of social and environmental change. The primary school setting is characterized by smaller class sizes where 25–30 students are taught by one classroom teacher. In contrast, Australian secondary schools have larger student cohorts and employ specialist teaching staff who teach 25–30 students for between 30 and 80 minutes before the students move to their next class. These differences in school structure require adolescents to adjust to significant changes in the learning environment, contributing to concerns and anxiety during transition as well as in anticipating transition [9].

In this paper, we conceptualized support for students at two levels, adapting Bronfenbrenner's Ecological model [10]: the micro-system and meso-system. First, we examined support students received from their immediate micro-system, which includes their interactions with family, peers, and teachers. Second, students' meso-systems, as expressed by their connection to school, were explored.

### Connection to family

The home environment plays a significant role in shaping adolescent health [11]. In one of the largest cross-sectional studies of adolescents [12], high levels of family connectedness was found to be the most consistent protective factor for reduced involvement in problem behaviors as well as improved emotional health [11]. More specifically, family communication and the quality of an adolescent's relationship with his or her parents had a positive effect in decreasing problem behaviors and substance use, delinquency, and depression [13]. Moreover, recent Australian data highlighted the combined role of parental attachment and connection to school on the development of adolescent depressive symptoms [14].

### Connection to peers

Developmentally, adolescents shift from a reliance on parents to a reliance on peers with peer support needed for the development of social, emotional, and mental health [15,16]. Consequently, negative peer interaction can have a harmful effect on physical, mental, and social health [17–20]. The transition from primary to secondary school is marked not only by a change in context but by a change in friendship groups as well. As a result the transition period can be characterized by increased feelings of isolation as friendship groups change and adolescents develop new friendships and lose friends. This also occurs at a time when students experience increasing pressure to attain high social status [21].

### Connection to teachers

The extent to which young people feel connected to and supported by their teachers is also a powerful predictor of their health and academic outcomes. Young people's connection to their teachers predicts positive social and emotional health outcomes such as better peer relationships, academic success, and reduced participation in health-risk behaviors [12]. Connectedness to teachers can also provide a buffer for negative connections to peers as well as the prevention of health-risk behaviors [22].

### Connection to school

School connectedness refers to the extent to which young people feel as though they belong at school [23] and remains one of the most important predictors of adolescent health, social, and academic outcomes [24]. School connectedness is associated with fewer problem behaviors [11,25,26], more interest in school [27], greater academic achievement [28–30], more likelihood of staying at school longer [12,25,30], and less likelihood of truancy from school [27]. Those students who are highly connected to school are also less likely to experience depressive or anxious symptoms [11,12,28,31] and are less likely to be at risk for suicide [11]. These highly connected students are also more physically active and safety conscious [26]. Students with higher levels of school connectedness in primary school have better long-term health and educational outcomes, academic achievement, and social competence [32], and reduced likelihood of tobacco, alcohol, or other harmful drug use, criminal involvement, gang membership, and school dropout [32].

The specific research questions for this study are: (1) Do school connectedness, teacher connectedness, parent connectedness, and peer support in Grade 7 predict students' expectations of transition in Grade 7?; (2) Which of these four supports have the greatest impact on students' transition expectations in Grade 7?; (3) Do school connectedness, teacher connectedness, parent-family connectedness, and peer support in Grade 7 predict a students' transition experience in Grade 8?; and (4) Which supports have the greatest impact on students' transition experience in Grade 8?

## Method

### Study design

The data used in this paper were drawn from the Supportive Schools Project, a 3-year randomized cluster intervention comparison trial (2006 to 2008) testing the impact of a whole-school intervention, including curriculum, on students' experiences of bullying in a random sample of Catholic secondary schools. In Western Australia students currently transition from primary school at the end of Grade 7 when they are 12 years old and commence secondary school in Grade 8, the year they turn 13 years old. Approval for this study was provided by Edith Cowan University's Human Research Ethics Committee and the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia.

### Sample selection and recruitment

All Western Australian secondary Catholic Education Office schools located in the metropolitan area of Perth, Western Australia were invited to participate in this research. Of the 28 eligible Catholic Education Office schools, 20 agreed to participate in the study. After being recruited, schools were stratified according to total population size of the school (above and below the median school size of 811 students) and the school's