

Seen, heard and supported

A report from the *Settling
into Secondary School* programme

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Anna Freud

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Foreword

"Oh, my gosh, I'm going to be so lonely. I'm going to have no friends."

This is how one student described starting secondary school to us, a transition that often marks a moment of major developmental change in a young person's life.

New academic responsibilities, expanding social worlds and a taste of independence coincide with the biological and emotional changes of early adolescence. It can be a time of real challenge - including feelings of uncertainty, loneliness, and overwhelm - but also one of real possibility, as children discover new friendships, interests and a stronger sense of who they are.

The government's recent white paper rightly acknowledges that change is needed in schools to meet the needs of young people, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). It also recognises that belonging must sit at the heart of reform. This report reflects that same commitment, exploring how building a sense of belonging is key to helping children settle into secondary school.

At Anna Freud, we aim to transform mental health care for children and young people through science, collaboration and clinical innovation. For us, it was vital this project - which will lead to a framework for supporting wellbeing during this transition - started with the voices of young people. In these papers, you'll read about their fears and challenges during this transition, along with what helped.

We hope the report contributes to a wider conversation across the sector about how we help children build independence, agency and strong relationships with adults and peers at school. Our next step - working in partnership with parents, carers and education staff - is to understand where best practice is happening. Together, these conversations and this report will inform a more holistic approach schools across the UK can use to support students through this crucial stage.

Dr Lesley French,
Director of Schools and Clinical Practice at Anna Freud



Executive summary

The transition from primary to secondary school can be challenging. It is a time when students start to disengage from school, attendance drops and social, emotional and mental health challenges begin to appear. Students' voices about this transition are rarely considered and there is currently no national framework to guide schools in supporting a successful transition to secondary school.

This report presents findings from the first phase of *Settling into Secondary School*, a four-year Anna Freud programme designed to develop an evidence-informed transition approach that promotes wellbeing, resilience and engagement.

In this report, we present data from Year 8 students on their experiences with this key transition. Students consistently described transition as an ongoing process rather than a single event. This highlights the need for structured support through the entirety of Year 7 allowing adjustment, belonging and confidence to develop over time.

Many students felt overwhelmed by the size and complexity of secondary school and feelings of loneliness and social uncertainty featured in the students' accounts, suggesting that forming friendships and developing feelings of belonging should be recognised as important Year 7 outcomes. Clubs, pastoral communities and enrichment activities were repeatedly identified as helping students build friendships and increase confidence.

Students valued adults who listened, understood their concerns and treated them fairly. Relationships with teachers and other staff were among the most important protective factors identified by students. However, students reported a tension between increasing expectations of independence and limited opportunities for choice and control which can impede these relationships. Policies that unnecessarily restrict autonomy may undermine wellbeing and engagement. Students' experiences of fairness, empathy and consistency strongly shaped their adjustment.

Starting secondary school presents a unique opportunity to better support the needs of students and secure their engagement and educational outcomes in the years to come. National and local education policy should reposition the start of secondary school as a critical wellbeing, belonging and engagement period, requiring sustained support for autonomy, competence and relatedness throughout Year 7 rather than a short-term focus on induction and academic readiness alone. This could be achieved as part of the government's wider plans to introduce a Pupil Engagement Framework. Including wellbeing and mental health alongside measures of belonging, motivation and inclusive practices would support schools to develop a robust understanding of their students' mental wellbeing, strengthen system-wide understanding of need, and contribute to better attendance, engagement and educational outcomes.

While this report focuses on hearing students' voices, the next phase of our work will focus on hearing from parents and gathering examples of best practice from schools to create a practical framework which can be disseminated to schools and sit alongside the new Pupil Engagement framework, offering evidence-informed guidance on better supporting students' transition to secondary school.

Acknowledgements

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About Anna Freud

Anna Freud is a pioneering mental health charity, transforming care for children and young people through science, collaboration and clinical innovation. Our research sheds light on why mental health problems develop so we can design new approaches to prevention and intervention with children, young people, families and communities.



About Settling into Secondary School

Settling into Secondary School is an Anna Freud programme exploring ways to help schools and parents develop strong support for students in Year 7. Our aim is to develop an evidence-informed transition approach that promotes wellbeing, resilience and engagement, as well as training and resources for schools. It is a response to growing concerns about students' mental health and wellbeing^{1,2} and calls for a more holistic approach to supporting student wellbeing and development.³

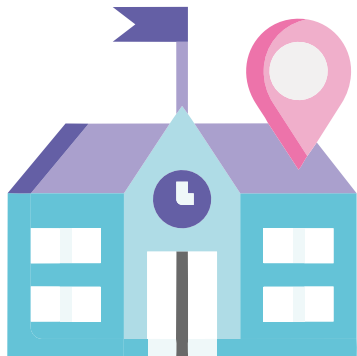
Key findings

- Primary to secondary transition is an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. Adjustment, belonging, confidence and wellbeing develop over time.
- Practical and academic preparation matter but support for emotional adjustment matters more.
- Feelings of loneliness, uncertainty and social isolation were common concerns among students, and the transition is emotionally and socially challenging.
- Relationships with teachers and other staff were among the most important protective factors identified by students.
- Students reported a tension between increasing expectations of independence and limited opportunities for choice and control. Policies and practices that unnecessarily restrict autonomy may undermine wellbeing and engagement.
- Students described significant challenges managing timetables, homework, equipment and organisation. Independence developed gradually and required support.
- Many students felt overwhelmed by the size and complexity of secondary school. Practical preparation reduced anxiety and increased confidence.
- Students' experiences of fairness, empathy and consistency strongly shaped their adjustment. Perceived unfairness or punitive responses reduced trust and willingness to seek help.
- Clubs, pastoral communities and enrichment activities were repeatedly identified as helping students build friendships, confidence and belonging.

Policy recommendations

- National and local education policy should reposition the transition to secondary school as a critical wellbeing, belonging and engagement period, requiring sustained support for autonomy, competence and relatedness throughout Year 7 rather than a time for short-term focus on induction and academic readiness alone.
- The new national Pupil Engagement Framework should include meaningful mental health and wellbeing measures.
- Provide a good practice guide for starting secondary school, including practical approaches and case study examples.

Recommendations for schools



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| Extend transition support throughout Year 7 rather than concentrating activities before or at the start of secondary school, for example more frequent opportunities for parents to visit the school, Year 7 only drop-down days or excursions. | Invest in relationship-centred transition practices that support positive teacher-student relationships, for example, stable tutor groups for most or all activities; regular contact with an increasingly trusted adult. |
| Conduct regular check-ins on students' understanding of routines, and academic expectations, normalising mistakes and providing early reassurance. | Provide structured opportunities for social connection through form activities, peer mentoring, clubs, enrichment activities and transition events. |
| Consider how timetabling and resource allocation supports relationships, for example, ensuring Year 7 tutor teams include staff with sufficient pastoral experience and are also scheduled to teach Year 7 RSHE and wider Year 7 curriculum. | Invite colleagues from feeder primary schools to help review secondary school policies and practices. Consider the role of longer break and lunch times, cloakroom or locker spaces and classroom layouts in encouraging autonomy. |
| Adopt a <i>support-first</i> approach to help students overcome difficulties and scaffold independence, for example, explicit teaching of organisational skills and taking time to understand barriers to organisation and offering targeted support where needed. | Treat friendship formation as a key Year 7 outcome and avoid changes that destabilise emerging relationships, for example, reforming tutor groups. Where changes of grouping are unavoidable, approach these new transitions with the same care as the transition from primary school. |
| Provide opportunities before and after transition to explore the school without older students in attendance for example, with parents, on Year 7 transition days and a specific Year 7 showcase evening. | Provide safe and inclusive spaces for Year 7 students to express their views to adults who will take their views seriously and act on them where appropriate, for example, around behaviour management or lunch arrangements. |
| Review aspects of the school environment that contribute to overload or stress, including crowded spaces, lunchtime arrangements and organisational demands. | Review policies and practices that may unnecessarily restrict autonomy, such as access to facilities, movement around school, or overly rigid routines. |
| Provide extracurricular activities for all students who want them. Training for older peer mentors can help support these spaces. | Create opportunities to meaningfully hear from students about their needs and experiences. |



Introduction

Starting secondary school is a major milestone that brings opportunities for growth, independence and new relationships, but it is also a period of vulnerability. Research consistently shows that the experience of starting secondary school can affect wellbeing, mental health and educational outcomes.^{4, 5, 6} Getting the transition right matters. More than one in four students begin to disengage during Year 7 and attendance, trust, agency, feelings of safety and wellbeing decline.⁷ One in nine students aged 10–17 report being unhappy at school.⁸ The evidence highlights the need for sustained support beyond the first few weeks of secondary education.

Students who feel connected to school before transition tend to report better wellbeing and mental health afterwards, while difficulties during transition are associated with poorer attendance, reduced attainment, anxiety, depression and lower wellbeing.^{9, 10, 11} Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with special educational needs, those who have experienced adverse life events, and those who are worried about the transition are particularly at risk of poorer outcomes.¹²

School environments that support autonomy (choice and control), competence (feeling capable) and relatedness (feeling connected to others) (self-determination theory) promote wellbeing, engagement and school belonging, while more controlling environments may undermine these outcomes.^{13, 14, 15, 16, 17}

Supportive relationships, opportunities for meaningful participation and clear support to build confidence and independence can enhance school connectedness, engagement, academic outcomes and wellbeing.^{15, 16, 18, 19, 20}

This report presents findings from the first phase of Settling into Secondary School, which explored students’ experiences of starting secondary school and identified opportunities to strengthen future transition support. Our findings provide a first step towards creating the first national framework for supporting wellbeing during the move to secondary school keeping students’ voices at the very heart.

Methods

To explore students’ experiences of moving from primary to secondary school, we conducted focus groups with 49 Year 8 students (aged 12 to 13 years) across seven secondary schools in England (six mainstream schools and one specialist setting). Schools were recruited through Anna Freud’s school networks. School staff identified students to participate, obtained the necessary consent and assent, and ensured appropriate safeguarding procedures were in place.

Students were mostly female and a high proportion had SEN status and were eligible for pupil premium and free school meals (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participating students as reported by school staff.

Demographic characteristics	Number	Participants
Female	37	(75.6%)
Male	12	(24.4%)
SEN	28	(57.1%)
Free School Meals	20	(40.8%)
Pupil premium eligible	25	(51.0%)
White	31	(63.3%)
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	6	(12.2%)
Asian or Asian British	4	(8.2%)
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	6	(12.2%)
Unknown ethnic group	2	(4.1%)

Focus groups explored students’ experiences of transition, belonging and wellbeing, guided by Self-Determination Theory. Discussions were facilitated by an Anna Freud researcher and a School Engagement Trainer, with school staff present only for pastoral support. Transcripts were anonymised and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, with inductive coding conducted in NVivo and Excel and themes refined through team review.²¹

What students told us

Students were asked about their experiences starting secondary school. We wanted to know about their social and emotional experiences, the ways in which their autonomy, competence or relatedness were supported or hindered, what was helpful or unhelpful in relation to their wellbeing, and what recommendations they had for improving transition and wellbeing provision in secondary schools. The five themes discussed below reflect the issues that mattered most to students:

1 Feelings of overwhelm and challenges navigating secondary school

2 Belonging cannot be assumed

3 Students need to feel seen, heard and treated fairly

4 Independence requires support, not simply expectation

5 Transition is a process rather than a single event



1 Feelings of overwhelm and challenges navigating secondary school

Students described transition as entering a much larger and more complex environment, requiring them to learn new routines, timetables, classrooms, teachers and behavioural expectations simultaneously. Many reported feeling lost, confused, nervous or overwhelmed during the first weeks of secondary school. Difficulties navigating the school often reflected broader uncertainty about expectations and belonging.

"... [T]he school was practically empty for our first day because it was only us here and it was easy to find around (sic). But then, after that, it started getting busier and busier ... There's a load more people. You need to be able to find your way very quickly around because, otherwise, you're just going to get lost and pushed out the way."



Students were also concerned about a range of new responsibilities, including homework, assessments, detentions, uniforms and remembering equipment. They often reflected uncertainty about meeting secondary school expectations. These concerns frequently contributed to anxiety and reduced confidence during the transition period.

"The next week, it was straight into tests. And personally, I didn't like that because it made me feel, 'Oh, should I have practiced for this? I wasn't expecting that. I've just come off a six-week holiday and now, I'm being put to the test of, 'Can I do what's on the paper? If not, am I going to fail? Am I going to be rubbish? Am I going to get picked on for it? What's going to happen with me when I'm not ready?'"



Alongside navigating a larger physical environment, students were adapting to new organisational systems, behavioural expectations and increasing academic demands, which frequently contributed to anxiety and reduced confidence.

"I just don't think any of us really knew what to do, because there were a couple of kids in my class that I just went around with, but we didn't really talk to each other about anything. We just followed each other around. It felt like none of us really knew what to do. I think we were all confused."



The impact on students

- Reduced confidence
- Anxiety about making mistakes
- Fear of lateness and punishment
- Emotional overwhelm during the early stages of transition



What helped students adapt

Students identified several factors that helped, including induction activities, school information, maps, timetables, peer support and opportunities to practise routines before starting secondary school.

For example, one young person explained how summer school events helped them become familiar with their new secondary school:

"[...] I met one of the people in my form through an art thing that happened here in the summer. So then, we already knew where art block was, and so we knew where the maths was and the tech. So that helped a lot. We, kind of, moved as one big group, which was quite good. So if one person got lost, everybody got lost. So it was quite fun. But I also know people who I knew who were older. So I already knew... they'd tell me where to go if I got lost or something, so that was pretty good."

Students also described establishing routines, practising travel routes and using online learning platforms to manage workload and prepare for lessons. Over time, familiarity with school systems increased confidence and reduced anxiety.

"One thing I'd say that really helped me [...] so I do two ways of getting to school because of my parents. And I tried to run both a couple of times. [...] So we, kind of, ran the journey, which helped me feel quite a bit more prepared, because I was so scared I was [getting] the bus [...]."

Practical guidance, information and opportunities to practise new routines appeared to strengthen students' sense of competence by helping them feel more capable of meeting the demands of secondary school.



2 Belonging cannot be assumed

A central concern for many students was whether they would make friends, fit in and avoid loneliness. Students described pressure to be accepted by peers, anxiety about first impressions, uncertainty about how to form new friendships in an unfamiliar social environment, and about being judged by others.

"Oh, my gosh, I'm going to be so lonely. I'm going to have no friends."

"You felt like you needed to make friends, which made it even more awkward because you were just doing small talk with people trying to get to know them. But yeah, you can't force on somebody to say something to somebody and then, all of a sudden, you're friends."



The move to secondary school often disrupted existing friendship networks and required students to establish new relationships, sometimes without any familiar peers in their form group. This created uncertainty about where they belonged within the new school community.

"[...] I was put in a form with none of my friends. All my friends got at least one person from primary school that they knew and I didn't get anybody, so I was actually terrified. I was like, 'Oh, no. I'm in this classroom full of people who I actually do not know.'"



Students frequently worried about being judged, excluded or left out of established friendship groups. These concerns reflected a broader need to feel accepted and connected within the school community.

"I kind of felt a bit left out, if you know what I mean? Because everyone had always already formed these friendships and it was just harder."



Difficulties forming social connections contributed to anxiety and isolation. Some students experienced sustained loneliness during the early months of secondary school.

"Well, I didn't really tell anyone. I just, kind of, sucked it up until December when I actually just started making new friends."



These findings suggest that social adjustment is not merely an additional challenge of transition but a fundamental aspect of students' wellbeing, confidence and engagement with school.

The impact on students

- Loneliness and social isolation
- Reduced school enjoyment
- Difficulty settling into the new environment
- Increased emotional distress



What helped students adapt

Students frequently identified family members, peers, older students, mentors and school staff as important sources of reassurance, guidance and practical support during transition. These relationships helped students feel connected, cared for and supported as they adapted to a new school environment. Parents often helped students develop routines and manage new responsibilities:

"My parents helped as well for me, like helped me get used to doing homework and stuff like that, just trying to get ready and not to forget things [...]."

Older students, siblings and mentors provided practical advice about navigating secondary school and understanding what to expect:

"I have a friend who is older than me and she was already in the high school when I was going to go. So she gave me tips about how to get around or what to have on you."

Teachers were also viewed as approachable sources of support when students encountered difficulties:

"Teachers really for me, like anything to ask about, like if you're struggling with anything, you can ask them for help."

Students additionally highlighted clubs and extracurricular activities as valuable opportunities to build friendships and strengthen their connection to the school community.

"Being part of clubs, being included in school, going to competitions and stuff like that, and I think that makes you feel like part of the school [...]."



3 Students need to feel seen, heard and treated fairly

Students frequently contrasted experiences in which they felt listened to and supported with those in which they felt unheard or treated unfairly. Relationships with school staff played an important role in shaping students' early experiences of secondary school. Students valued teachers who were approachable, listened to their concerns and responded supportively when they needed help. One student described how a teacher's understanding response during their first lesson reduced their anxiety:

[O]n my first day, a lesson of art, I didn't know we had to print it, I didn't have a printer at home and I didn't have any printer credit. So, I was sobbing, like, 'I don't know [...], I'm so bad.' Then she was like, 'It's okay, it's only your first lesson[...].'



By contrast, students reported frustration when their perspectives were dismissed or when behavioural systems appeared inconsistently applied. For example, one young person described how they felt that it was unfair that students faced different consequences for the same negative behaviour:

"[S]o, one person could do the exact same thing as another, but one person would get different consequences. So like, let's say I was talking to another person, but the other person was shouting across the room or something, most of the time, depending on who it is shouting, they'd probably get less punishment than I would."



Another young person highlighted how sometimes teachers would not hear them out or believe them:

"If you do something wrong... sometimes they might not believe you, because some kids lie about it, but you're telling the truth, and when they don't believe you, it's frustrating."

In these situations, students often felt powerless and uncertain about how to navigate school expectations. Feeling listened to, respected and treated fairly was central to students' experience of transition. Positive interactions with teachers increased confidence and belonging, whereas dismissive or unfair responses contributed to frustration and uncertainty.



Some students highlighted how teachers' non-empathetic responses left them feeling unsupported.

"Even if you do feel upset and crying, honestly, I don't think the teachers do, really, much... they just tell you to, 'Grow up,' and... 'You can sort it out on your own.'"

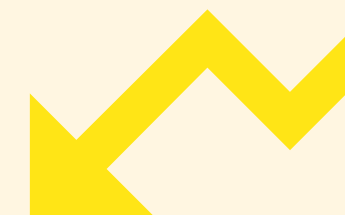


In contrast, empathetic responses from teachers helped students feel understood and reassured.

"[...] I just had lots of teachers to talk to, and I got told that it was going to be okay [...]."

The impact on students

- Reduced trust in adults
- Lower willingness to seek support
- Weaker sense of school belonging
- Perceptions of unfairness and exclusion



What helped students adapt

Students identified a number of relational factors that helped them adapt to secondary school. In particular, trusted relationships with teachers, form tutors and pastoral staff helped students feel listened to, understood and supported. Regular contact with familiar adults and opportunities to discuss concerns appeared to reduce uncertainty and strengthen students' sense of belonging.

Students frequently highlighted the importance of having a trusted member of staff they could approach when difficulties arose: "[...] So, when [name of teacher] got our group, it was quite nice that you could just go and tell her everything that's happened, even if it was a while ago."

Similarly, students valued teachers who were approachable and willing to listen: "Some teachers, I'm very comfortable with, just to talk to them about stuff. For example, my form tutor, and also my history teacher, because I really like her."

Pastoral and wellbeing services also provided an important source of support, offering students a dedicated space to seek help when needed:

"I can say the wellbeing hub as well, because [...] yeah, you could talk to them any time, come here, things like that."

In addition, students emphasised the value of consistency and regular contact with staff. Seeing the same teachers frequently helped them become familiar with school expectations and develop a stronger sense of connection to the school community:

"For, like, the first week, seeing your teachers again, like an English teacher, because you have that most days. So, you kind of got used to seeing them."

Overall, students appeared to adapt more successfully when they had access to trusted adults who listened, checked in regularly and provided consistent support. These relationships helped students feel recognised and valued, contributing to a stronger sense of belonging during the transition to secondary school.



4 Independence requires support, not simply expectation

The transition to secondary school involved a significant increase in responsibility. Students described having to manage timetables, equipment, homework and changing classrooms, often while adapting to more demanding academic and social expectations.

"It's thinking, like, 'Oh, I've got science today.' But then, it's like, 'Oh, wait. I've got two books. I've got two teachers. Which teacher is it?'... You take your science booklet instead of your Spanish booklet... it's that feeling of, 'I've done something wrong.'"



Students described learning new routines while managing increasing academic demands and concerns about making mistakes. Although many adapted successfully over time, these changes could initially feel overwhelming.

Despite these increased responsibilities, students often felt they had limited control over aspects of school life, including movement around school, seating arrangements, access to facilities and behavioural expectations.

One student noted how restrictions on using the toilet affected their wellbeing:

"[I]t was the fact that you can't go to the toilet in lesson unless you're busting. [...] [I]n Year 7 [...] I was so scared that if I drank water at a certain time I would just need to go to the toilet, then I'd be told off and wouldn't be able to go to it. So, I didn't drink and then when it was okay to drink, I didn't feel thirsty at the time, so then I hadn't drunk in a while and then I just got really lightheaded [...] and fainted."



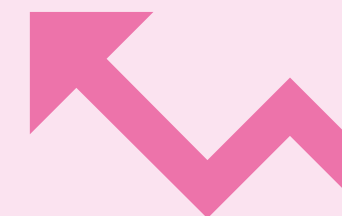
Another young person described both frustration and unhelpful strategies for gaining agency:

"It's like you need to fight somebody to be able to get what you want, and people are doing it to move [classes]."

These accounts suggest a tension between the growing independence expected of students and the autonomy they felt they were afforded. While students were encouraged to take greater responsibility for their learning and behaviour, opportunities to exercise choice and control could sometimes be constrained, making adaptation more difficult.

The impact on students

- Stress and frustration
- Feelings of powerlessness
- Reduced autonomy
- Unhelpful coping strategies in some cases



What helped students adapt

Students described supportive adults, clear routines, opportunities for self-expression and the gradual development of independence as important factors in helping them adjust to secondary school. Parents and teachers helped students manage new responsibilities and build confidence, while routines such as homework schedules and becoming familiar with timetables helped students feel more organised and capable.

Opportunities to pursue interests and express themselves through activities also supported confidence and autonomy. Overall, students reported that independence developed over time, suggesting that students benefit when schools provide guidance and structure while gradually increasing opportunities for autonomy and self-management.



5 Transition is a process rather than a single event

Despite the challenges encountered during the early stages of transition, most students reported that the move to secondary school became easier over time.

"It got easier... I think it's just like me getting used to it."

"No, it's like, more relaxed... Yeah. Now I know where I'm going to find all my lessons and all that."



Students gradually became more familiar with routines, school expectations and the physical environment, while developing friendships and confidence in managing academic and organisational demands.

"Well, the first few weeks for me, it was a bit hectic, because I didn't know what to do.... I got lost a couple of times... And then, eventually, I just got into the rhythm of everything, and it just got better for me. And I'd already made a couple of friends, so it, kind of, made it better for me."



Others described becoming more confident as they established social connections and developed a clearer understanding of teachers' expectations.

"You kind of get into the flow of it, and you find out what you can do with certain teachers and what you should probably not do with others. And then, you'd also figure out... you just get into the gist of what it will be like, and you kind of know where you're going. So then, you just blend in, and it just feels a bit better then."



These accounts suggest that transition is an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. As students became more familiar with school life, they reported greater confidence in their abilities, stronger social connections and increased independence. Some described growing confidence through academic success, while others highlighted the importance of friendships in helping them settle into secondary school.

"Probably having friends around, and to not be like a person who just walks around by themselves, because I feel like people who walk around by themselves, it's really sad, too. But, having friends to walk around with actually made me settle in a little bit more."



Students also reported developing new skills and confidence over time:

"Well, I feel like I've just developed more skills. [...] I feel like I've just learnt how to properly communicate with people and not just assume that everyone's going to be best friends..."



Overall, adjustment appeared to be facilitated not simply by the passage of time, but by opportunities to build confidence, develop supportive relationships and gain increasing independence. As students became more familiar with their new environment, they felt increasingly capable, connected and in control.

The impact on students

- Adjustment occurs at different rates
- Early challenges can have lasting consequences if unsupported
- Some students require longer-term support than others



What helped students adapt

Students emphasised the importance of ongoing support, positive relationships and opportunities to develop a sense of belonging. Support from parents, friends and teachers helped students manage challenges, build confidence and feel reassured during the transition. Trusted adults who listened and provided encouragement were particularly valued, while peer relationships offered both practical and emotional support.

"Having your parents by your side. Like, I've got a thing, I get home and I call my mum every day, because I don't see her until she gets home from work. So, just little things."

Participation in activities outside the classroom also helped students maintain and develop friendships, strengthening their sense of belonging:

"Because I do taekwondo... I have some of my closest friends come with me... And we'd just tell each other how school was that day."

Many students highlighted that adjustment took time. Confidence and enjoyment of school increased as they became more familiar with the environment and developed friendship groups that felt right for them:

"...[Y]ou've just got to immediately talk to and surround yourself with the people that are closest to you in your class. But it might actually take you a while to find your people... And I think, the people that you are actually friends with and whether they're right for you or not can change how much you enjoy school."



Special school differences

We included students from one special school in our research. They expressed many similar concerns about the move to secondary school regarding nervousness starting in a new setting, getting to know other students and teachers, and finding their way around. They also shared some insights unique to being in a special school setting.

They expressed some relief and hopefulness about moving to a special school.

"...I was kind of glad I was going to go to a special needs... when I came up to here, I think I was glad I was going to a school where people would have similar conditions like me... I'm autistic... because I didn't have loads of friends at my old school, and almost everyone at my school was neurotypical. ...[I] was glad at the fact that I'd hopefully find some friends that I can relate to condition wise."

"...[M]y first few weeks [...] it felt a lot better than my primary school because they understand you better. They actually know how to help you and what you need to excel. [...] It really, really helps kids to explore new horizons and help them learn and make them feel better about leaving."

Students from the special school told us that a more tailored approach, which took into account their voices and individual needs, was helpful:

"In the induction day, they asked us, like, 'What would you like from us?' and everything, and, 'How would you like to help us, and how would you like us to help you?' And after a few weeks, they asked, 'If you ever do get dysregulated or upset,' they asked us, 'who would you like to speak to? Who's your favourite teacher that you'd like to speak to?'"



What have we learned about starting secondary school?

Students' accounts suggest that transition is not simply a practical move between schools but a significant emotional and social process that shapes students' wellbeing, confidence and sense of belonging during the first years of secondary education, with challenges arising from both the practical demands of secondary school and uncertainty about social belonging. Many students reported feeling nervous, overwhelmed, confused and uncertain during the early stages of Year 7 and had concerns around making friends, fitting in and avoiding loneliness.

Students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness

The findings suggest that students' experiences during transition can be understood through the three core psychological needs outlined in Self-Determination Theory: autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Competence

Students' sense of competence was often challenged during the early months of secondary school. Many felt uncertain about navigating the school environment, managing timetables, organising equipment, completing homework and meeting academic expectations. These challenges frequently led to feelings of anxiety and self-doubt. However, competence appeared to grow over time as students became familiar with routines, understood expectations and gained confidence in their ability to manage school demands. Practical information, clear routines and opportunities to practise new skills helped strengthen this sense of competence.

Relatedness

Relatedness emerged as a particularly important aspect of a successful Year 7. Students consistently highlighted the importance of friendships, positive peer relationships and supportive adults. Feeling accepted by peers and connected to the school community contributed to emotional security, confidence and school enjoyment. In contrast, loneliness, difficulties forming friendships and experiences of being overlooked or unsupported undermined students' sense of belonging and wellbeing. Positive relationships with teachers, family members, older students and peers played a crucial role in helping students feel connected and supported.

Autonomy

Students described increasing expectations for independence after moving to secondary school. They were expected to manage their learning, behaviour and organisation more independently than in primary school. However, many also reported feeling that opportunities for choice and control were limited by restrictive rules and systems. This created a tension between the responsibility students were expected to take and the autonomy they felt they were afforded. Students appeared to benefit when schools provided structured opportunities for independence, choice, self-expression and participation in decision-making.

Taken together, the findings suggest that successful transition occurs when school environments support competence, relatedness and autonomy. When students felt capable, connected and able to exercise some control over their experiences, they appeared better able to adapt to the demands of secondary school and develop a positive sense of belonging.

What helped wellbeing?

Students consistently identified supportive relationships as the most important source of help. Teachers who were approachable, understanding and willing to listen helped students feel safe, valued and supported. Family members, friends, older siblings and peer mentors were also frequently described as important sources of reassurance and guidance.

Practical supports were also important. Transition days, orientation activities, school tours, familiarisation visits, clear information and opportunities to practise routines helped reduce uncertainty and build confidence. Students also valued clubs, extracurricular activities and wider school opportunities that enabled them to make friends and feel part of the school community. Students from special schools noted that a more tailored approach that asked them about their individual support needs was appreciated.

What undermined wellbeing?

Students described several school experiences that negatively affected their wellbeing. These included inconsistent expectations, perceived unfairness, difficulties accessing support, restrictive systems and experiences of not feeling listened to by adults. Concerns about punishment, fear of making mistakes and uncertainty about social acceptance also contributed to anxiety during the early stages of transition.

Importantly, many of the factors influencing wellbeing were relational rather than purely academic. Students' accounts suggest that feeling respected, understood and supported may be just as important as practical or academic preparation when navigating the transition to secondary school.



Students' recommendations for improving transition support and wellbeing provision in secondary schools

The findings point towards several practical recommendations informed directly by students' experiences. A key message from the data is that transition should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. Students described needing support well beyond induction days and the first few weeks of Year 7, suggesting that schools should extend transition planning throughout the first year of secondary education.

Students' accounts also highlight the importance of prioritising belonging as a core transition outcome. Schools should create structured opportunities for friendship formation, peer connection and participation in extracurricular activities. Monitoring belonging and peer relationships throughout Year 7 may help identify students who require additional support.

Students repeatedly emphasised the value of supportive adults. Relationship-centred approaches that promote empathy, consistency and fairness may strengthen students' sense of connection and trust. Including students' voices is key to building relationships and making students feel supported.

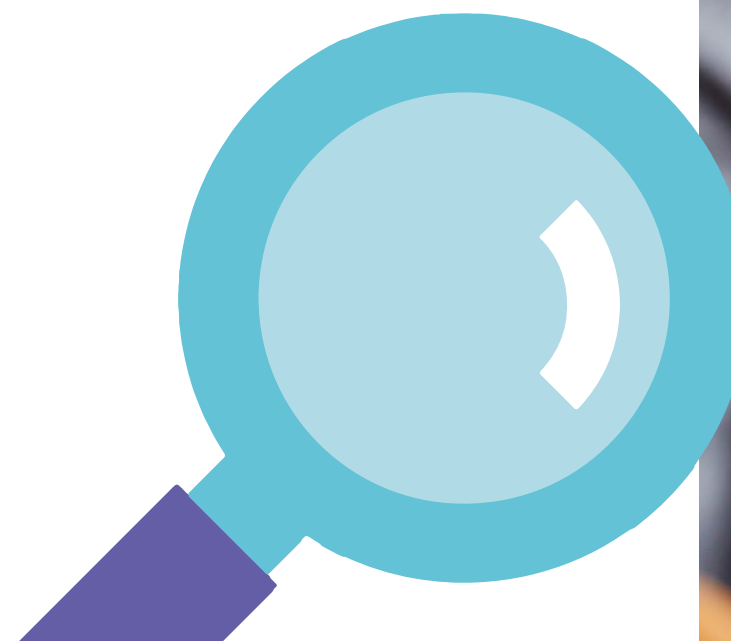
Students also highlighted the need for practical and organisational support. Clear information, consistent routines, opportunities to practise skills and gradual increases in responsibility can help students develop confidence and independence. Schools may also wish to review systems and policies that unnecessarily restrict student autonomy and consider ways to increase student voice, choice and participation in school life.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective transition support should address not only academic readiness but also students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. When schools create environments that help students feel capable, connected and in control, students appear more likely to develop positive wellbeing, engagement and a lasting sense of belonging.

Conclusion and next steps

This research gives voice to students during a crucial educational transition. Students' experiences suggest that successful transition is not simply about helping students find their classrooms – it is about helping them feel capable, connected and in control. Successful transition was supported by strong relationships, practical guidance and opportunities for autonomy. Students' accounts suggest that transition is an ongoing process, with belonging and wellbeing improving as confidence, friendships and familiarity with school increased. These findings support sustained, relationship-centred transition support throughout the first year of secondary school to foster wellbeing, engagement, belonging and long-term adjustment.

The next stage of this work is to engage with parents and carers and school leaders to compile a comprehensive framework with practical examples of how families and secondary schools can work in partnership to promote autonomy, relatedness and competence to better support the transition to secondary school for students. We intend to work with policymakers to integrate the framework within policy and practice.



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