Transition Groups for Preparing Students for Middle School

Patrick Akos & Megan Martin

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Patrick Akos
Megan Martin
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

School counselors can use groups as an effective and efficient means of helping students. Psychoeducational groups provide information and build skills to help prepare students for developmental tasks. As students complete elementary school, these preadolescents face the challenging tasks of moving to middle school and beginning puberty. School counselors can capitalize on peer influence and prepare students for the transition to middle school by using the group format. This article describes a model of a psychoeducational group aimed at preparing fifth graders for the transition to middle school. Implications and results of a pilot group are also presented.

Keywords: *school transitions; transition groups; elementary to middle school; proactive groups; psychoeducational groups*

Several researchers have identified the transition to middle school as a difficult developmental task that often includes negative personal and educational outcomes (Anderman, 1996; Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998; Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989; Elias, Gara, & Ubriaco, 1985). Developmentally, students experience both a contextual change (schools) and a personal transition (puberty). Eccles et al. (1993) have identified the typical middle school or junior high environment as developmentally inappropriate for preadolescents. The drastic switch in school environment is difficult for most students to manage. As students attempt to negotiate the contextual change, an intense personal change often occurs with the beginning of puberty. These normative changes create important challenges for students during transition.

Patrick Akos is an assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Megan Martin is a former school counseling master's student and currently a school counselor in Orange County, NC. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Patrick Akos, Box #3500, School of Education, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599; phone: 919-843-4758; e-mail: akos@unc.edu.

Several researchers have proposed interventions to help students with the contextual transition from elementary to middle school (Eccles et al., 1993; Felner et al., 1993; Schumacher, 1998). Interventions have been conceived at both systemic and individual levels. For example, systemic interventions include adjusting the context of schools so they are more developmentally appropriate (i.e., teaching teams, advisory programs). Systemic interventions can also be proactive, including tours of the middle school for elementary school students and orientation programming for all students starting middle school. Individual approaches have commonly included individual counseling and tutoring, mostly targeting students who struggle with adjustment in middle school. Perhaps the most developmentally appropriate yet underused intervention for students making the transition to middle school is school counselor–led transition groups.

The developmental changes and challenges in preadolescence provide a unique opportunity for group counseling, because most students report seeking help with the transition from peers (Akos, 2002). As students begin middle school, peers take on a more important role in the student's life. Both the importance and intimacy of peers increase as students begin to establish an identity outside of the family (Eccles et al., 1993). In fact, Petersen, Leffert, Graham, Alwin, and Ding (1997) suggest that peer support can be a protective factor for preadolescents and act as a buffer against negative influences.

Two studies have investigated the effectiveness of group intervention for students in sixth grade after making the transition. Walsh-Bowers (1992) found that a social skills curriculum delivered through creative drama groups was a useful intervention for students new to middle school. Qualitative reports and satisfaction questionnaires from students, parents, and teachers revealed that the groups could facilitate students' adaptation to the stresses of school transition. Specifically, parents and teachers of the students suggested that group participants were better adapted than control group students. In a different study, Greene and Ollendick (1993) found increases in GPA and improved behavior for students participating in a remedial problem–solving, social skills–based group for new students in sixth grade. They also indicated that these students "may be additionally served through a prevention program . . . in 5th grade" (p. 174).

Weldy (1991) also suggested that those in "sending" schools should prepare students for the academic and social transition. Transition groups at the elementary level are proactive by addressing students' needs, concerns, and questions prior to the transition. Proactive intervention of this type has the potential to ameliorate many of the negative outcomes research has attributed to the transition. As students look to

peers for information and help for the upcoming move, transition groups offer students the ability to work with peers in a structured environment with adult guidance and accurate information about the transition. Transition groups also help students build supportive networks among their peers that can potentially act as a buffer to the stress and anxiety that occur during transition.

The purpose of this article is to describe a psychoeducational transition group model for fifth-grade students preparing for middle school. Pregroup considerations, group themes, activities by session, as well as evaluation procedures are presented. An experiential summary and reflections of a pilot group in an elementary school are also discussed.

PREGROUP ISSUES

Member Recruitment

Previous research (Crockett et al., 1989; Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991) has demonstrated that the transition from elementary school to middle school is a challenge for all students. A recruitment process can be built into traditional transition programming that typically occurs in elementary schools. For example, fifth-grade students often meet with school counselors to talk about class scheduling for middle school. School counselors can use this opportunity to provide information to students and teachers about the availability of transition groups. Teachers and counselors can encourage those students who seem anxious about the transition to sign up. In addition to self-referrals, teachers can nominate students. It would be equally beneficial for elementary school counselors to send information about the groups home to parents/guardians. This is especially important because research (Akos, 2002; Weldy, 1991) has demonstrated that parents remain an important source of guidance during the transition. Parents may be aware of their child's anxiety about the transition that goes unnoticed at school.

Screening and Selection

Although all students can benefit from a transition group, research has also suggested that certain groups of students may be more at risk during the transition (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feiman, 1995). The research is not conclusive on how to target students for this intervention, although much of the research (Eccles et al., 1993; Seidman et al., 1995) suggests that females, urban minority students, and low performers may be most at risk in transition. An elementary school coun-

selor should pay particular attention to these subgroups in recruiting members for group participation. It is also useful for elementary school counselors to use an assessment process for screening to determine which students could benefit most from the transition group. The preferred method is to meet individually with interested students and students who may be at risk for declines in the transition. It is also useful to discuss specific questions and concerns about the transition to middle school. This procedure not only serves as a screening tool but also will help build content for transition group sessions. Screening also is necessary to identify students who may not be appropriate for the group (i.e., students with extreme levels of anxiety, students trying to avoid class work).

Group Size, Composition, and Format

The recommended number of group participants in elementary school ranges from four to six students (Thompson & Rudolph, 1999). Despite that, the format of the psychoeducation transition group and fifth-grade level of the participants allow this number to comfortably expand to eight. The larger number of students in the group is purposeful to developmental needs (peer orientation) and for expanding the support network of students.

Group composition is a more difficult issue. The development of preadolescents also includes a focus on sexual development (Berk, 1993). It therefore might be more beneficial to compose same-sex groups to reduce anxiety and bring more focus to transition issues. This might be especially significant for females, because transition research (Eccles et al., 1993; Simmons & Blyth, 1987) suggests that some loss in self-esteem by females is due to the dual timing of puberty and school transition. Girls' feelings about physical development and menstruation may be related to the negative outcomes. Therefore, female-only transition groups may help address these issues more effectively. At the same time, single-sex groups do not allow for interaction across genders. A mixed-gender group allows the counselor to explore opposite sex relationships with real feedback from both males and females. The group counselor best determines this delicate decision about the composition of group based on the participants and type of group content involved.

The group format and sequencing of activities are well guided by the current literature on school transition. Research (Akos, 2002; Schumacher, 1998) has suggested that academic, organizational, and personal/social issues are common thematic changes that students experience in the transition to middle school. Although social skills and

coping skill groups are also relevant to helping students with the transition, Kurita and Janzen (1996) suggested that information support about organization or procedures is the most important to the adjustment to middle school. This way, major themes and pregroup meetings help build content. The participants' concerns, stressors, and anxieties should help tailor groups to participant needs. Also, the specific context of both the elementary and middle school involved is important for discussion. In addition, positive aspects of middle school (i.e., freedom, more peers) should also be included in the group to help build optimism in students (Akos, 2002).

Understanding the limitations on school counselor time and the limited ability to meet with students during the school day, a five-session psychoeducational group model is presented. This will include an introduction, the three core content area (academics, organization/procedural, and personal/social) sessions, and a termination session. The content driven, short duration, and psychoeducational format of the proposed transition group provides limited depth for group dynamics and stages. If more time is available, each content theme (i.e., academic, organizational, personal/social) may be expanded to 2 to 3 sessions. A purposeful sequence of themes is also significant, because academics offer the most concrete content and area of concern for most students (Mitman & Packer, 1982; Odegaard & Heath, 1992). Saving personal/social themes for last allows group dynamics and cohesion to develop more fully, leading to better group discussion.

GROUP SESSIONS: THEMES AND ACTIVITIES

Session One: Introduction and the Pen Pal Activity

An important aspect of the first group session, as with any group counseling experience, is the introduction of members, setting of rules, establishment of expectations, and orientation to the group format (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2002). The depth of the introductions depends on the composition of group members. If all students come from a single fifth-grade classroom, less time or different types of activities may be required. Many guides exist for establishing a group in the first session (Corey & Corey, 2002; Jacobs et al., 2002), but one consideration for transition groups is to establish a group awareness and sensitivity to the anxiety, stress, curiosity, and excitement about the transition.

Another important part of this first session is establishing a connection for students to the middle school. This component of the group can

be extensive (i.e., a structure of e-mail, phone calls, or letters to teachers and staff at the middle school, providing regular meetings with middle school students as part of group, or even conducting group sessions at the middle school) or more simple (i.e., fifth-grade students write questions that are answered by current middle school students). This model presents a simple pen pal system. The elementary school counselor can contact the middle school counselor to recruit middle school teachers and students to participate in the activity. District configurations differ for single or multiple feeder and receiving schools, and the configurations play a role in how pen pal systems may be operationalized. The purpose is for fifth graders to get a perspective of middle school from actual students. In the first session, students can spend time thinking of questions that pertain to the theme of the next group session (academics). Questions can be sent to the middle school teacher by e-mail (to be answered by students) and answers sent back to the elementary school counselor in time for the next weekly group meeting. This aspect of group is another way to affirm the developmental orientation toward peers and reduce anxiety about the middle school by establishing a connection to older middle school students and staff. It also allows counselors to purposefully guide accurate and appropriate information that is passed on to the fifth-grade students.

Session Two: The Academic Transition

The second session focuses on the academic changes that will occur in middle school. Academic content is a safe and familiar topic for most students and an area where students report lower levels of concern in the transition (Akos, 2002; Diemert, 1992). Detailed information about classes, exploration of actual textbooks for middle school classes, teacher expectations for middle school, and information about testing in middle school can be useful topics for the group. It may also be important to highlight study skills and the various resources that are available to students in middle school (i.e., tutors, remediation classes, summer programs).

It may be useful to engage students in discussion about managing multiple teacher relationships, multiple teacher expectations, learning styles, test taking, tracking, and collaborative learning. The discussion should especially include information about academic classes that are not offered in elementary school or unique to middle school, like exploratory classes (i.e., art, band, chorus, technical education), physical education and health classes, and homeroom or advisory classes. These classes are often viewed by students as very positive (Akos, 2002) and can help build academic optimism for the transition to middle school.

Session Three: Organizational Transition

Beyond academic themes, organizational or procedural aspects of school transition include a host of contextual aspects distinct to middle school. For example, students move from class to class in a significantly different way in middle school. In most elementary schools, students walk with the entire class in a straight line with a teacher. In middle school, students are usually left on their own to go from class to class (where the distance may be extensive) in approximately 3 to 4 minutes. The psychoeducational group can include activities to simulate this task by completing missions within the group with a 4-minute time requirement. If available, counselors can also provide maps of the middle school to orient the students with major locations such as classrooms, main offices, nurse, and the cafeteria. This may help them get a picture of the distances they will travel. Another example of organizational content for the group can include combination locks. It may be useful for students to practice opening combination locks because students, for the most part, receive lockers for the first time in middle school. Other topics for discussion include the concepts of teams, looping (staying with teachers or teams multiple years), class schedules, an increased number of (and new) students, and being the youngest students in the school.

The idea of rules, expectations, and procedures has been shown to be of primary concern to students (Akos, 2002; Diemert, 1992; Odegaard & Heath, 1992). It would be helpful to include discussion of middle school rules (using handbooks from the middle school) and feedback from middle school administrators. Group counselors can also discuss teacher expectations for homework and classroom behavior. The group should explore all of the new day-to-day aspects of the middle school, but at the same time remind students of the similarities between the elementary and middle school.

Session Four: Personal and Social Transition

The personal and social theme may become the most intense session of the group with the intensity and diversity in preadolescent development. Two themes that are particularly relevant include personal growth and development and social relationships. Fifth-grade students usually have experience in health curriculum that addresses some of the physical changes that will occur. The transition group can build on this instructional curriculum by providing students an opportunity to talk with peers about these changes and how they relate to going to middle school. For example, students may be prompted to talk about physical development by comparing the height of students within the group. It

would be important for the group counselor to prompt discussion about how aspects of physical development relate to popularity, intimate relationships, and well-being in middle school.

Often relative to physical development, social relationships change and evolve in the transition. Research demonstrates that adolescence is a period of increased conflict with parents (Berk, 1993). The process of establishing an identity outside the family unit is a developmental task in middle school that typically causes stress to both parent and child (Eccles et al., 1993). Prompting students to discuss peer and family relationships and identity formation within the group can be extremely useful. In addition, identity and how it relates to intimate relationships is important. Students can be prompted to talk about best friends and relationships that can and most likely will change with the transition to middle school due to the new and increased opportunities for friendship. Although these topics may be more sensitive and serious, group counselors should make sure to remind students of the positive opportunity that middle school presents.

Session Five: Summary and Termination

The termination of a group is an important event. It is useful to close group process, but to keep the topics and peer network open for ongoing discussion and support during the school transition. The school counselor should include structure to synthesize the academic, organizational, and personal/social transitions that occur in middle school. She or he should also facilitate this content with an attention to and focus on establishing an identity and what was gained through group process. Creating awareness among the students about identity formation and the exciting decisions they will make is an excellent way to apply the group experience to the future. For example, group counselors may terminate the group by having students forecast and provide projections about the transitions and have students envision what they will be like in middle school.

Evaluation of Group

Whereas transition research and developmental theory provide a strong rationale for this type of group, evaluation is necessary to determine the usefulness and effect on students. Elementary school counselors can evaluate this group in a variety of ways. The most simple is providing students with a questionnaire or survey at the end of group. The questionnaire or survey can include items about what was learned during group, what students learned about themselves and their peers, and

recommendations for future transition groups. Postgroup individual meetings can also help the counselor evaluate the group. Counselors can gauge levels of student anxiety about the transition to middle school in comparison to the pregroup meetings. In that same vein, school counselors can design pretest and posttest surveys to examine the effectiveness of the group. In a pre/posttest format, the elementary school counselor can ask questions with Likert-type responses that assess student anxiety, student questions, student concerns, student optimism, and overall feelings about the transition. In this way, school counselors can compare pre/posttests to gauge the effects of the group intervention. Similarly, counselors may use an experimental design by staggering the transition groups to compare experimental and control groups. This type of evaluation can even be extended into the following year when students are in middle school. In conjunction with middle school counselors, students can be interviewed or given follow-up surveys about the transition to the middle school. In this way, elementary school counselors can compare students who participated in the transition group to students who did not participate to help determine the significance of the transition group.

PILOT GROUP SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

Three pilot groups were held in a large elementary school in the southeastern United States. The school is located in an area adjacent to two major universities, medical centers, and research corporations. This results in a school population represented by more than 70 countries. The rich diversity is evident, because no one race/ethnicity makes up more than 50% of the school population. Approximately 80% of the students in this elementary school feed into a large, public middle school, whereas 20% of the students attended two other middle schools.

Pregroup Procedures

The school counselor made an announcement in each fifth-grade classroom that included a brief explanation of the purpose of the group and the potential topics for discussion. Students were instructed to complete interest forms and each teacher provided recommendations about any additional students who need or would benefit from the transition group. A total of 15 students returned interest forms, whereas teachers recommended 5 students. Each student completed a needs assessment/ pretest, returned a parental consent form, and met with the school counselor prior to group. The pretest was a modified version of the School

Transition Questionnaire (Akos, 2002) that assessed what concerns, questions, or needs students had about the transition. The questionnaire also asked how helpful key people are and what aspects of middle school they look forward to. The pregroup meeting was also used to assess student readiness and appropriateness for group and helped determine group placement and composition.

Ten males and nine females participated in the groups. The students were randomly distributed into one group of females ($N = 6$), one group of males ($N = 5$), and one mixed-gender group ($N = 8$). Groups were scheduled to meet once a week for 30 minutes for 5 weeks. Racial backgrounds included seven African Americans, seven Caucasians, three Middle Eastern students, one Hispanic, and one Asian student. All of the groups were held in the afternoon near the end of the school day and met in a small multipurpose room beside the school library.

Group Themes and Activities

Session One: Introduction and Pen Pal. The first group, and subsequent sessions, began with an opening ritual to help students get to know each other and to become comfortable with self-disclosure. The first session also included an exercise that prompted students to answer questions about themselves and encouraged other group members to guess answers. Along with the exercises to get to know each other, the group counselor encouraged students to create group rules and procedures. The leader also briefly outlined each session and answered any student questions. The pen pal program was introduced and described to students. They were encouraged to write anonymous questions related to the next week's topic (academics), although all questions were accepted.

The first session for each group found students attentive and engaged in getting to know one another. The majority of the first session was spent discussing and revising important topics to group members. During this time, the all-male group was most talkative whereas the all-female group was most reserved. The mixed-gender group, the largest of the three, was active as students competed to get involved in the conversation. Students felt comfortable with the topics and added specific questions to discuss. All of the students wrote questions and were excited to have the opportunity to interact with current middle school students.

Session Two: Academic Transition. Session two began with the opening ritual, followed by a Family Feud style game. Students tried to deter-

mine the answers to three top 10 lists (important supplies, teacher expectations, keys to success). Each list prompted discussion and the group leader disseminated information to further group discussion of class schedules, elective choices, and work assignments at the middle school. Information was gathered from the middle school Web site and school staff. Comparisons were made to the elementary school and the session concluded with students reading and discussing some of the responses from the middle school pen pals about academics. Each student also wrote questions concerning the next topic, organization.

The team nature of the Family Feud game helped build connections between students, and more dialogue was directed between students rather than at the group counselor. On the other hand, it was particularly difficult to get all of the content processed following the game due to both time restrictions and student engagement in the process of the game. It was noticeable that all three of the groups were active and talkative for this session, with the all-male group still exhibiting the most discussion both on and off topic. The pen pal letters became a major focus of the session, because students were excited to read handwritten letters from middle school students. The groups took the letters very seriously, and some tended to generalize the content to all middle school students. For example, if a sixth grader wrote that they failed a lot of exams, then particular students assumed that all sixth graders failed exams. It was important to process the middle school letters and highlight the different perceptions and experiences among the sixth-grade students.

Session Three: Organizational Transition. After the opening ritual, the group began with a discussion of what students currently do to stay organized, situations when they had to be organized, and how successful they are currently. Much of the discussion related to the previous session about supplies and work expectations. The group counselor presented lessons on organization skills within the discussion. Group participants also completed the "Changing Classes" exercise. Students practiced opening a combination lock and discussed how lockers work (i.e., how they're issued, when students can use lockers). Students also took turns in small groups practicing "going to their locker" with time constraints. A combination lock was located in a separate part of the building and students had to get to the locker, unlock the lock, and return to the group in the allotted time, approximately 4 minutes. This gave students a perspective on time and seemed to make them feel better about their capabilities. The group ended by going through the pen pal letters and writing questions for the next group meeting.

Giving the students an opportunity to practice opening the locker gave them confidence and reassured many fears that were expressed in

the first part of this session. Students were able to acknowledge that they already possess the skills they need to succeed, know ways to organize, and have done similar tasks in elementary schools. The all-female group wanted to discuss the notion of confidence further, which produced rich discussion. The other groups (all-male and mixed-gender) seemed to stay focused most on opening lockers and time between classes. Overall, the 30-minute time restriction on the session severely limited the depth of the processing of information.

Session Four: Personal and Social Transition. This session was guided by content but did not include an activity like previous sessions. The group counselor introduced topics such as fears and thoughts about the new relationships they will face, making new friendships and maintaining old ones, intimate relationships, and the presence of older students. Students were guided to direct questions, comments, and feedback to each other. This session also included more time than in previous sessions to discuss the pen pal letters, because many of them directly addressed many of the concerns raised by students. The session ended with a reminder about confidentiality and a brief orientation to the last session.

Perhaps due to the lack of structure or the sensitive nature of the topics, discussion was difficult to initiate. The diversity of the groups was also a major factor in this session. With at least two students in each group born outside of the United States, the notion of being new and having to make friends prompted students to talk about their experiences making friends and how these skills may be useful in the move to middle school. This session also resulted in distinctions between the three groups. The male group was most open and eager to discuss various topics, including personal changes and girlfriends. In fact, group members reminded each other of the confidentiality rule when members were reluctant to share. It seemed group cohesion was especially strong in the male group compared to the more reserved female and mixed-gender groups. Some of these differences may also be attributed to the female group counselor, because the male group directed many girlfriend issues to the leader.

Session Five: Summary and Termination. The final group meeting was a day of closing activities and processing learning. The opening ritual was followed by a posttest and thank you letter writing activity to the middle school pen pals. The remainder of group was spent reviewing the major themes and content of group. Some students brought up new questions, but most of the session was characterized by informal conversation about the end of the school year. Although each group was lively

and active, the different groups focused on distinct topics. The male group continued conversation about girlfriends, the female group asked specific questions about academics and procedures (i.e., how they will get lockers, where classes will be, how they get books), and the mixed-gender group discussed a variety of topics about daily activities and upcoming school events.

Evaluation

Each student completed a pretest as part of the parental consent and group sign-up and each completed the posttest in the final session. Both forms were adapted versions of the School Transition Questionnaire (Akos, 2002). The pretest and posttest also included open-ended questions. The pretest open-ended questions focused on what students wanted to discuss in the group sessions and the posttest questions asked what students have learned and how it was helpful to students.

A total of 14 students completed both the pretest and posttest (3 students did not complete the form correctly and 2 did not complete the posttest). The change from pretest to posttest showed a decline in the frequency of concerns. For all group participants, the number of concerns declined from $n = 105$ to $n = 65$. Another promising finding was the mean rating for how helpful students/friends were reported to be and how helpful middle school students appear to be. For students/friends, the mean average in the pretest was $x = 2.14$ as compared to the posttest, $x = 2.64$ (range from 1 = *not helpful* to 4 = *very helpful*). For middle school students, the pretest mean of $x = 2.29$ increased to $x = 3.07$. With low sample sizes, no statistically significant differences between groups or between pretest and posttest emerged. Even so, the trends in the data did suggest a promising effect for the group intervention.

Additional information from the posttest demonstrated that 93% ($n = 13$) of the students reported that the group helped decrease concerns about middle school and 100% of the students reported that the group helped prepare them for what middle school will be like. Each student listed items that they learned during the group (i.e., "opening lockers," "it is not as hard as I thought," "how sixth graders feel in middle school," "how to make friends"). Most of the students reported that they enjoyed talking with other students about middle school.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is important to consider this group intervention in the context of traditional transition programming. Some of the transition literature

call for wide-scale structural changes in the junior high or middle school format to match the developmental needs of preadolescents (Eccles et al., 1993; Felner et al., 1993). As such, most suggest that transition programming is delivered at the middle school level, including orientation, teambuilding, tutor or mentor programs, and advisor programs to help students (Felner et al., 1993; Ferguson & Bulach, 1994; Greene & Ollendick, 1993; Leland-Jones, 1998; Walsh-Bowers, 1992; Warren-Sohlberg, Jason, Orosan-Weine, & Lantz, 1998).

To promote successful school transitions, it may be most useful to include transition groups in elementary school to prepare students for the transition. Both friendship quality and stability relate to better student adjustment to the middle school and have a protective effect in the transition (Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, 1999). Because students must reorganize social and network support during transition (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1993), elementary transition groups provide formalized structure to build peer assets prior to the transition. The groups also address social needs because most students report little or no help with the social transition (Diemert, 1992). Also, along with social support, psychoeducational groups provide information support about the transition, which was found by Kurita and Janzen (1996) to be the most influential to emotional and academic adjustment in middle school.

Adjustments to the model presented here should be made based on school context and needs of group participants. The five-session model may not be extensive enough to adequately prepare students for the transition. There also may be ways to include middle school students and staff and a way to include the families of fifth-grade students in the transition groups. The five-session pilot group demonstrated potential useful effects, but more evidence is needed.

Further research should investigate the effectiveness of groups in an experimental design using a comparable control group and a longitudinal design investigating effects that may extend into middle school. It also may be most useful to examine the level of effectiveness of transition groups as one factor of the entire transition program of a school district. For example, schools can determine if groups are a more effective way to help students with the school transition as compared to tours, mentor programs, and orientation. In this way, schools can devote time and resources toward the most effective way of helping students.

"School personnel can capitalize on this developmental opportunity to prevent problems and foster positive pathways" (Ebata, Petersen, & Conger, 1990, p. 20). Psychoeducational transition groups are a developmentally appropriate and helpful intervention for fifth-grade preadolescents. They have the potential to reduce student anxiety, prevent

negative outcomes associated with transition, and positively influence the developmental paths and school success for preadolescence, as well as begin to establish supportive networks among peers.

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