

Alcohol Prevention Without the Classroom

By Nick Schickert

As the school year winds down and summer creeps closer, children will be looking for ways to fill their days, but not every idea they have is a good one. Underage drinking spikes every year during the summer by a significant amount due to the increase in freedom and unsupervised gatherings.

Increasing freedom is tied to underage drinking, but it does not mean that every child is drinking, or that the solution is to keep kids as busy as possible. Despite popular belief, underage drinking is still relatively rare. Only about 33% of youth between the ages of 12 and 20 claim to have had one or more drinks. Many of these youth drink only once or twice before age 21. Binge drinking is far rarer, with only about 11% of underage drinkers reporting participation within the last year. This may be a small number of children overall, but it is still far from zero. As an educator or parent, there is still plenty you can do to help reduce the temptation of underage alcohol consumption.

Intentional Family Time

Strong family bonds have always been shown to reduce underage consumption of alcohol or drugs. This time can be as simple as nightly dinners or just a chat. Building a stronger bond with your family increases trust, time supervised, and knowledge of behaviors, making it easier to spot any changes that may be concerning.

Have an open and honest conversation

An open, judgment-free conversation about alcohol has been proven to reduce overall drinking and increase safety if any drinking is to occur. A helpful tip for this conversation is to include your rules about alcohol and what will happen if underage drinking occurs. Studies have shown that children who are aware that privileges will be lost if caught trying to drink underage tend to drink less.

Encourage Summer Activities

Keeping busy with fun and safe activities during the summer is a great way to keep youth away from alcohol. Not only does this take up their time with healthy activities, but research has also demonstrated that summer activities foster a stronger sense of fulfillment and goal setting, which are both linked to lower underage consumption rates. It is important not to overbook your kid on activities, as burnout can lead to increased rates. Finding a healthy balance that promotes both activity and rest can be hard, but it can be reached with an open conversation.

Sources:

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. "Underage Drinking | National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)." *Nih.gov*, Jan. 2025, www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/underage-drinking.

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Making the Middle School Jump: How Families and Educators Can Support the Sixth Grade Transition

By Tessah

Graduation from elementary school is a significant accomplishment for young students and marks the beginning of many preteen milestones. Students will soon be entrusted with new responsibilities and gain more independence. This is an important moment for both students and their families, and students should feel proud of their achievement.

Yet, many young students find the transition from fifth to sixth grade to be challenging and experience feelings of uncertainty. These feelings about the transition are valid and are accompanied by significant changes, including changes in physical structures and school routines, increased academic pressures, and social-emotional development. Understanding these challenges can help educators and families better support students during this transition.

Challenges of Transition:

Elementary students often have highly structured environments and daily routines paired with low independence; they are accustomed to their teachers organizing materials, tracking assignments, and guiding daily movement through the school. Whereas middle schoolers are required to navigate larger buildings, keep track of their schedule and schoolwork, use lockers, and manage time. The shift from a highly structured, low independence environment to one with less structure and more independence can feel daunting when suddenly implemented.

Middle school also brings greater academic pressures. Middle schoolers must manage multiple courses and expectations from many teachers, adjust to a faster-paced curriculum, and seek additional support from teachers via email. Middle schoolers face a tougher grading system: a shift from standards-based grading to letter grades with weighted assignments.

Students spend six years in their elementary building, and the loss of familiarity with the physical environment, teaching staff, and established routines can be anxiety-inducing. They are often accustomed to their elementary classmates, but new classmates and older students disrupt established social networks and hierarchies. While new sixth graders might struggle externally to find their identity within a larger social pool, they simultaneously experience internal disruptions: an intensified sense of self-consciousness, hormonal changes, and changes in daily mood caused by the onset of puberty.

Preparation before Sixth Grade:

Given these challenges, supporting students requires a joint effort from school personnel and families in order to (1) ease students' feelings about the transitions and (2) gradually prepare them for the fall semester. As students finish fifth grade, schools and families can begin gradually shifting responsibility to their students: encouraging students to manage their own assignments, establish consistent homework and bag-packing routines, use tools like watches to build time management skills, and practice practical skills such as opening locks. Visiting the

school through orientations, summer walk-throughs, or attending events can also make the new environment feel more familiar.

Continued Support:

Once sixth grade begins, educators and families can help build organization systems, like using color-coded notebooks assigned to different classes and developing note-taking methods. Students should review the course agenda, use a planner to track assignments and test dates, and learn how to write an email to their teachers when they need help. Complete weekly grade checks to help students stay on track. At home, fostering open conversations and check-ins about what students are learning, identifying areas of struggle (academic or social), and reinforcing that it is okay to ask adults for help is also important. Practicing real-life scenarios like navigating peer interactions in the hallways and lunchrooms or handling peer pressure can build students' confidence. Encouraging involvement in extracurricular activities and keeping families connected to the school community further supports students in developing a sense of belonging.

It is important to note that parents and teachers also struggle with letting their elementary students move on to middle school. For parents, involvement and communication with the school's Parent-Teacher Organization and with other families may help ease this transition. For elementary educators, scheduling end-of-the-year transition meetings with middle school personnel can provide reassurance that their students will continue to be supported.

School-Wide Supports:

Broader school-based efforts may include using programs such as Teammates Mentoring, hosting summer open houses, inviting the middle school counselors to meet with the incoming students at the feeder elementary schools to introduce themselves and answer questions, and having current sixth graders speak to incoming sixth graders about their experiences. Middle Schools should also set clear expectations at the beginning of the year regarding bullying (both in-person and online), vaping, and other inappropriate behaviors, and communicate these expectations to both students and their parents. It's also important that students and their parents know what support services are available and how to access them. Emphasizing a positive school environment and encouraging students and their families to participate in school-based activities can further support the transition.

This transition often feels daunting for incoming sixth graders, and sometimes they feel alone during this process. However, it's important for those students to recognize that they are not alone, and that many of their peers are experiencing the same mix of emotions. With encouragement, preparation, and small strategies to build self-confidence, this shift to middle school can become an opportunity for growth and an introduction to greater independence.