

Changing Schools **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

Thousands of children will be moving to new schools this fall, either due to family relocation, zoning changes in their current school system, or moving from elementary to middle school or middle to high school. For most kids its tough leaving the old and familiar and having to learn how to navigate not only a new school campus, but also to make new friends. Then there's the issue of figuring out the best location for the locker, who to sit with at lunch, and just how to break into perhaps already established social groups.

In talking with children personally and professionally, I've found that their greatest fears tend to be social in nature. Sure, many are concerned about grades or getting along with their parents and siblings, but as kids become more conscious of peers, fitting in or being ostracized, and the potential of "being invisible" to others at school, it's the social dilemma that seems to pervade their thoughts as they move into new school situations.

So, how can parents help their children with the transition? Well, there are several avenues to consider:

- If your child is staying in the same home but moving up to middle or high school, they probably know at least a few kids who will be going to the new campus with them. Try to get the kids together over the summer to strengthen friendships so that they will have someone to hang out with the first week of class.
- Most schools have an orientation night about a week before school begins. Be sure to attend, and encourage your child to go also. He or she may see some familiar and friendly faces to buddy-up with, or may be able to make some new acquaintances that can be strengthened if they find themselves together in class or in the cafeteria.
- Encourage the kids to plan to eat lunch together the first day or two of school, or to meet a few minutes early at the lockers. Comparing schedules and having someone to walk with to the next class or lunch comes in handy, and helps to relieve the "first week jitters".
- Also encourage your child to be friendly to new kids—that not only helps to ease their anxieties, but it broadens your youngster's social horizons and they may find that the new friends are just as compatible, dependable and fun as are their old buddies.

If your child is moving to a new school where he or she probably will not know anybody, here are some tips to consider:

- The orientation evening the week before school begins becomes mandatory! Your child may meet a kid or two in the same boat, and they can swap phone numbers and make plans to sit together in the cafeteria the first day of school. To many children the thought of knowing no one, and having to eat alone at the end

- of a table full of kids who already know each other, is a scary thought. Most end up spending their lunch break sitting alone or wandering in the library.
- Become active in the school if possible. This will allow you to meet other parents, and perhaps you'll be able to stimulate some friendships for your child via the other moms and dads also volunteering.
 - Highly encourage your child to join clubs, sports teams and to attend activities. Even if the kid could care less about the chess or drama clubs, at least she'll be able to meet some other children and to begin to make friends and establish familiarity with the other kids. Sports teams are excellent avenues for encouraging friendships—practice time after school often leads to going over to other's homes on weekends for sleepovers or just pizza and a movie.
 - Become best friends with the school guidance counselor. These folks are concerned that the kids feel comfortable in their school and usually have creative ways of getting kids together.
 - Encourage your child's involvement in study groups. Invite the group to your home and be sure to provide lots of food. Believe me, they will want to come back to your house!

Perhaps most important, though, is to make sure that you are really listening to your child. Asking "Did you have a good day at school today?" will probably yield a quick "Yes", whether it's true or not. Kids are often embarrassed to discuss their social fears, even with their parents. Ask more specific questions, such as:

- Who'd you eat lunch with today?
- Do you walk to class with anyone in particular or do you walk alone?
- Who do you talk to before, during and after class?
- Is anyone being particularly nice to you?
- Is anyone teasing or intimidating you?
- Have you found a favorite teacher that you would feel comfortable talking with if there was a peer problem?
- What groups, activities or sports teams are currently active, and would you consider joining at least one or more?
- How's it going at your locker? Do you know anyone whose locker is near yours? Would you like to have your locker moved to be near your new friend?

Ultimately, it's up to your child to make the connection and friendship with peers, but hopefully these tips will help you, the parent, make those first few weeks a bit less worrisome and a whole lot more fun for your child.