

## **How students change**

Students in the first year at any school are just finding their way around, getting to know the layout of the buildings, and the way that primary, middle or secondary school actually works. This lack of knowledge about school systems means that they are far more malleable, and you can mould them to your way of thinking, behaving and working. By the time they reach the last year of the school, however, the students have reached the top of the heap. Their increased status means that they will probably start to test the boundaries, and incidents of misbehaviour are more likely to occur.

The following descriptions of students at different ages in their schooling are brief, general guides to some of the factors that may affect their behaviour. Perhaps we sometimes forget what it was like to be young – to be starting a new school for the first time, or the confusion that changes in our bodies and our emotions brought us when we were adolescents. Thinking back to these times in your past will help you offer a greater degree of empathy to your students.

### **The primary school student**

When they first start at school, children are little tiny people. They may be completely overwhelmed by the setting and all the different things that they have to find out. This is often their first lengthy encounter with adults other than their parents or carers, and school can be a confusing and scary place for them. Little wonder, then, that they might be naughty. In an attempt to test what is acceptable behaviour in this strange, new situation, children may ‘act out’ in undesirable ways. These very young children are entering an environment where many new things are expected of them. Some children may not have previously experienced the behaviours that the teacher requires, such as sitting still on the carpet or concentrating on an activity for an extended period of time.

In addition to finding the new setting strange and confusing, children of this age have little idea of what others think and feel – a very limited ability to empathize. It is only as they grow older that children realize their bad behaviour may make others (children or adults) feel unhappy and upset. When I did my first teaching practice at a primary school, I was amazed by how little children of this age actually knew. I tried to teach a geography lesson using a globe, but my reception-aged class proved to be completely unaware of the greater world around them. All their encounters up to this stage had been on a very local scale, a fact that I had ignored. Remember that school offers very young children a strange and different place about which to learn.

### **The middle school student**

Moving from primary school to middle school is in some ways easier than the move from middle to secondary school. In fact, a lot of children will stay at the same school for the whole of their ‘primary’ education. At this stage, children still have only one teacher for all or most of their lessons, and this gives them a sense of continuity. If they do not get on with that one teacher, though, this can be a recipe for trouble. Children of this age are starting to push at the boundaries imposed by adults, and beginning to test exactly how much they can get away with. Puberty is starting at an increasingly young age, and middle-school teachers may in fact encounter many of the issues linked to these physical and biochemical changes in their students.

Middle-school children start to become more physically imposing, and some of your students may grow much faster than others. It is easy for us to perceive a large, tall child as also being mentally and socially advanced, and to expect better behaviour because we expect them to be generally more mature. Try not to have stereotyped expectations of your children according to their physical appearance.

### **The secondary school student**

Secondary school poses many challenges for young people. Not only do they have to adapt to a totally different environment, but they are also moving into adolescence, a time of vast changes in their physical, mental and emotional make-up. Secondary schools are normally a great deal bigger than the primary or middle school, both in their physical size and in the numbers of students. It is easy for children to get lost in these new surroundings. In addition to this, before they reach secondary school, children may have many preconceptions about bullying, and other horrible things that they think might be in store.

Not only do the students have to deal with all these things, but they also change suddenly from having mainly one teacher for the whole curriculum, to having a different teacher for each subject. They will also be expected to move from room to room for their different lessons. Because secondary school teachers are dealing with large numbers of students, there is not so much opportunity to get to know each child as an individual, and to understand each student's learning needs.