

# Pupil mental health, concerns and expectations about secondary school

Frances Rice  
Wolfson Centre for Young People's Mental Health  
Cardiff University

**Wolfson** Centre  
for Young People's Mental Health  

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# Talk overview

- Mental health and the transition from primary school to secondary school
- Children's concerns and expectations about the transition to secondary school
- What factors are associated with transition success measured later?
  - Preliminary look at possible mechanisms (peers, bullying)
- What implications do the results have for supporting young people over the transition to secondary school?

# Data overview

School Mental Health (2021) 13:279–298  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-021-09415-z>

ORIGINAL PAPER

## Pupil Mental Health, Concerns and Expectations About Secondary School as Predictors of Adjustment Across the Transition to Secondary School: A Longitudinal Multi-informant Study

Frances Rice<sup>1</sup>  · Terry Ng-Knight<sup>2</sup> · Lucy Riglin<sup>1</sup> · Victoria Powell<sup>1</sup> · Graham F. Moore<sup>3</sup> · I. Chris McManus<sup>4</sup> · Katherine H. Shelton<sup>5</sup> · Norah Frederickson<sup>4</sup>

Child Indicators Research  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-021-09815-2>

## Socio-Economic Status, Mental Health Difficulties and Feelings about Transition to Secondary School among 10–11 Year Olds in Wales: Multi-Level Analysis of a Cross Sectional Survey

Graham Moore<sup>1,2</sup>  · Lianna Angel<sup>1</sup> · Rachel Brown<sup>1</sup> · Jordan van Godwin<sup>1</sup> · Britt Hallingberg<sup>3</sup> · Frances Rice<sup>2,4</sup>

- School Transition and Adjustment Study (STARS)
- 10 secondary schools in Greater London and Cambridge N=1646
- School Health Research Network
- 210 secondary schools in Wales (94% response rate to 2019 survey, overall pupil response rate 72% N=119,388)

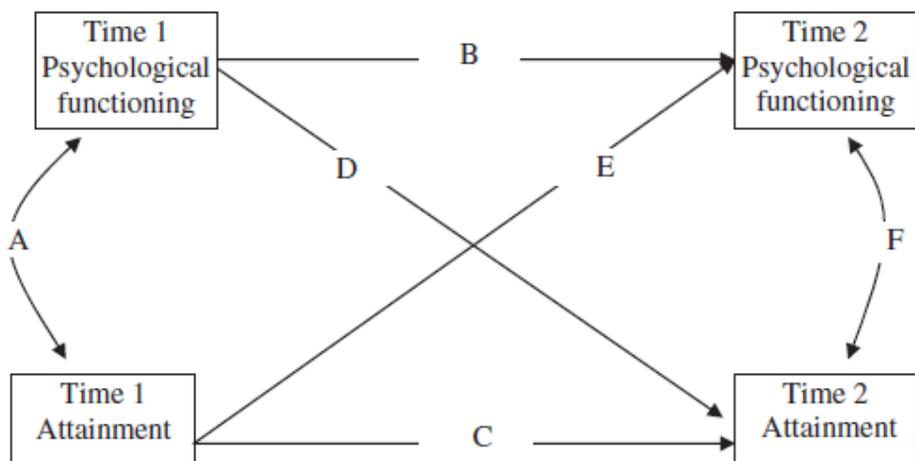


# Transition from primary to secondary school

- Identified as one of five important transitions for young people by World Bank
- Co-occur with other significant changes (puberty)
- Transition periods – heightened susceptibility to change
  - Windows of opportunity for intervention
- Transition periods negotiated successfully can have long term effects

# Background (i)

- Mental health difficulties at the beginning of secondary school associated with lower academic attainment (controlling for stability of



**Lucy Riglin**

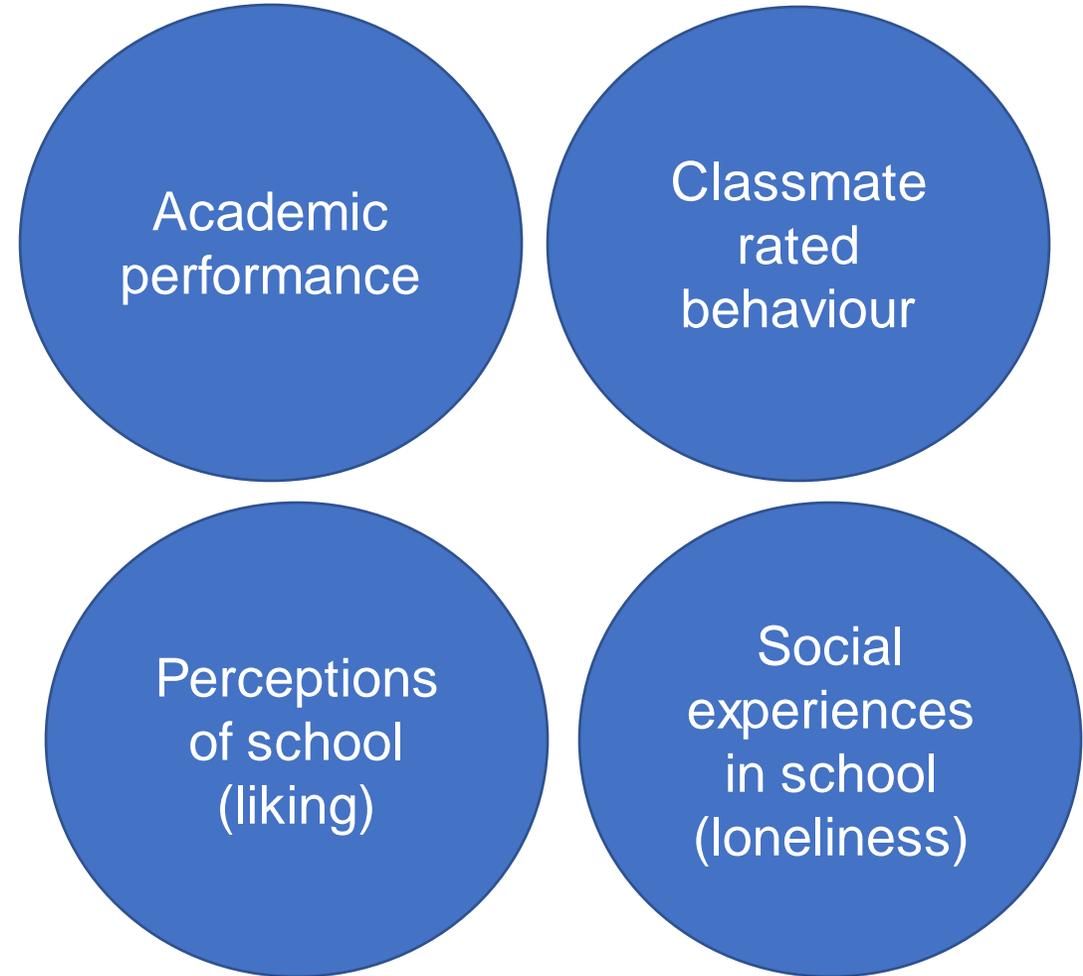
Cross-lagged effects on academic attainment:

- Depressive symptoms
- Conduct problems
- School liking
- School concerns (boys)

# Background (ii)

## How to define a successful transition?

- Multi-dimensional construct
- Four primary cognitive and inter-personal demands:
  - Progressing academically
  - Meeting expectations of new school and teachers
  - Becoming comfortable in new school environment
  - Gaining acceptance by peers



# Who's concerned? Mental health and demographic influences

- Pupil mental health problems associated with greater concerns about transition (Moore et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2011)
- For those with mental health problems, parents and teachers have lower expectations that pupils will settle in well to secondary school

# Who's concerned? Mental health and demographics

Table 2 Cross-sectional Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Study variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Pupil concerns	–												
2. Parent expectations	– .295***	–											
3. Teacher expectations	– .121*	.353***	–										
4. Emotional problems	.319***	– .362***	– .318***	–									
5. Peer problems	.191***	– .276***	– .371***	.473***	–								
6. Conduct problems	.128***	– .179***	– .287***	.272***	.311***	–							
7. Hyperactivity	.162***	– .382***	– .400***	.314***	.289***	.458**	–						
8. Total difficulties	.286***	– .439***	– .482***	.746***	.702***	.637**	.763***	–					
9. FSM eligibility	– .006	.028	– .206***	.133*	.217***	.054	.021	.150*	–				
10. SEN status <sup>b</sup>	.262***	– .461***	– .584***	.354***	.362***	.295**	.412***	.479***	.246***	–			
11. EAL	– .041	.220***	.082	– .004	.088	.061	– .028	.023	.122*	– .047	–		
12. Attainment (year 6)	– .177***	.234***	.520***	– .248***	– .263***	– .168**	– .243***	– .324***	– .282***	– .591***	– .121**	–	
13. Female gender	.105*	.055	.158**	.036	– .092*	– .137**	– .250***	– .153***	– .024	– .169***	.002	– .061 <sup>a</sup>	–
Mean	70.01	16.47	16.63	1.88	1.39	1.00	2.90	7.16	.16	1.29	.29	4.23	.47
SD	30.51	2.26	3.00	2.22	1.78	1.28	2.49	5.62	.37	.66	.45	.69	.50

<sup>a</sup> $p < .1$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . N=433–1643 Acronyms: START=The Secondary Transition Adjustment Research Tool; FSM=Free School Meal eligibility; SEN=Special Educational Need status; EAL=English as an Additional Language. <sup>b</sup> to examine the association of SEN with binary variables, SEN status was dichotomised and a tetrachoric correlation calculated

# Who's concerned?

- Representative survey of 2218 children in Wales
- One third children reported being worried about transition to secondary school
- Two thirds looking forward to it
  - These items moderately correlated ( $r=-.37$ )
    - 14% neither worried nor looking forward
    - 18% worried but not looking forward
    - 49% looking forward to but not worrying about
    - 19% worried and looking forward to
- Groups more worried:
  - Schools with a higher % of pupils eligible for free school meals
  - Lower family affluence scores;
  - Higher emotional difficulties;
  - Less marked association with higher behavioural difficulties

# Who's concerned? Summary

- Outcomes:
  - Children's worries or concerns (total score)
  - Parent or primary school teacher expectations about how well children will settle in (academically, socially with peers, socially with teachers, to the new routine)
- Influences:
  - Special educational needs and lower academic attainment at primary
  - Those with pre-existing mental health difficulties
  - Eligibility for free school meals measured differently across studies
    - No clear association in STARS where measured at individual level (except on teacher rated expectations)
    - In SHRN schools where a greater % of children were eligible for free school meals had more pupils who reported being worried about secondary school

# What are pupils worried about?

- Open ended responses classified into themes:
- Bullying (35%)
- Friendships (impact on existing friendships) (23%)
- Academic aspects (14%)
- Navigating a new physical environment (12%)
- Relationships with teachers (3.5%)

# What do pupils look forward to?

- Open ended responses classified into themes:
  - Peer relationships (44%)
  - Academic aspects (28%)
  - Independence (5%)
  - Extra-curricular activities (6.5%)
  - A new start (7%)
  - Relationships with teachers (2%)
  - Better food (4%)

# What are pupils worried about?

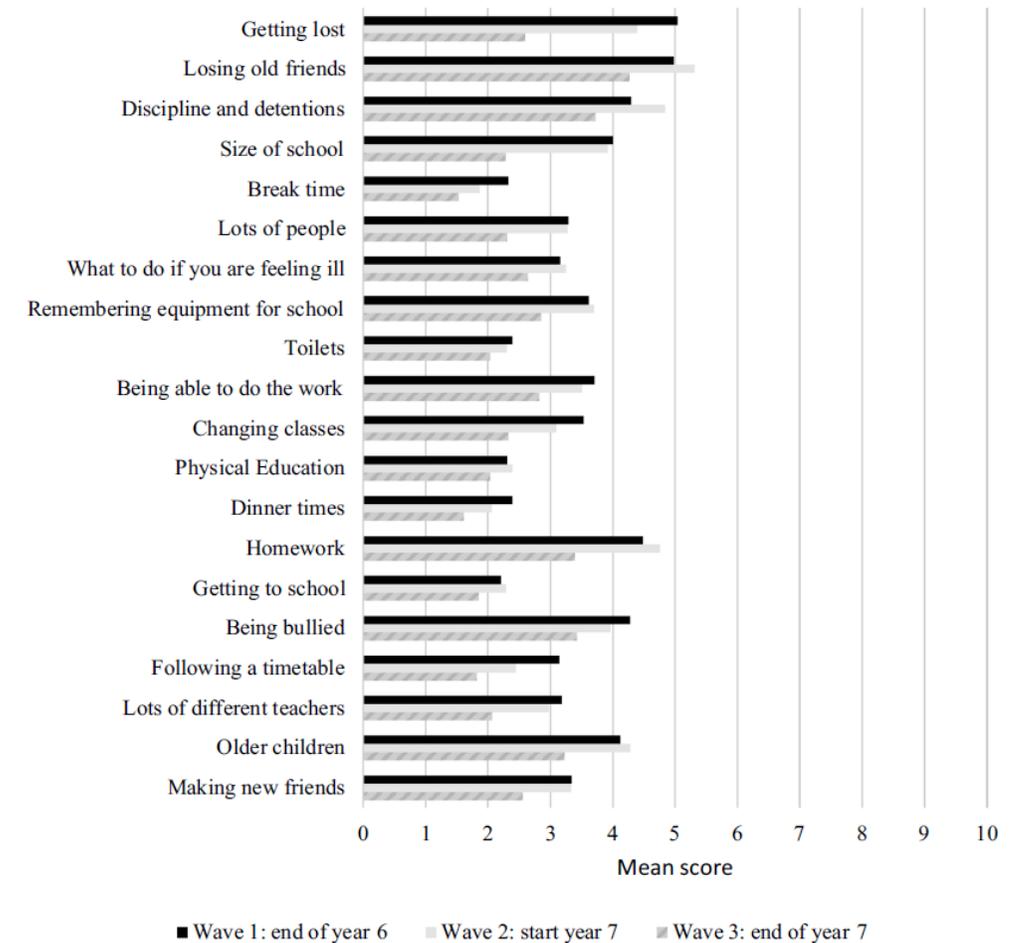
- School concerns questionnaire (20 items rated on a 10-point scale)

	End of year 6	Start of year 7	End of year 7
1.	Getting lost	Losing old friends	Losing old friends
2.	Losing old friends	Discipline & detentions	Discipline & detentions
3.	Homework	Homework	Being bullied
4.	Being bullied	Getting lost	Homework
5.	Discipline & detentions	Older children	Older children
...			
6.		<i>Being bullied</i>	
9.			<i>Getting lost</i>

# What are pupils worried about? Change over time

- Reduce over time
- Reduce more slowly for girls
- Certain items persistently endorsed:
  - Losing old friends
  - Homework
  - Discipline and detentions

*Pupil Concerns Across Study Waves*



# What are pupils worried about? Summary

- Concerns reduce post-transition
- The nature of concerns changes subtly pre and post transition
- Losing old friends is a persistent concern
- Transition is a period of flux for friendships
- Evidence that maintaining good quality friendships over transition is beneficial (Ng-Knight et al., 2019 B J Educational Psychology)

# What best predicts how well pupils settle into secondary school?

Year 6 (summer term)

Concerns

Expectations

Mental health

Year 7 (summer term)

Multiple indicators of transition to secondary school

- Academic attainment
- Classmate rated behaviour (cooperative, disruptive)
- School liking
- Loneliness at school

# What best predicts how well pupils settle into secondary school?

Year 6 (summer term)

Concerns

Expectations

Mental health

Year 7 (summer term)

Loneliness

Multiple indicators of outcome

Attainment & classroom behaviour

Primary teacher ratings all outcomes

# Summary of findings

- Some degree of apprehension appears normative:
  - Worry often co-occurs with looking forward to transition (1/2 of those expressing worries)
  - Most concerns reduce post-transition
    - More slowly for girls
  - Concerns about friendships, homework, discipline and detentions elevated post-transition
- Which young people have more concerns or parents/teachers expect difficulties with transition?
  - Children with special educational needs
  - Children from poorer schools and families
  - Children with pre-existing mental health difficulties (strongest associations for total difficulties and emotional problems)
- Longitudinal analysis shows:
  - Parent and teacher expectations associated with all aspects of post-transition functioning (attainment, classmate rated behaviour, liking school, not being lonely at school)
  - Pupil concerns associated with relatively few aspects of post-transition adaptive functioning
  - Mental health difficulties associated with academic attainment and classmate rated behaviour

# Implications for practice

- Transition to secondary school
  - Key life course stage when inequalities emerging during childhood may be widened (Moore et al., 2020)
  - Window of opportunity for intervention as most schools have support programs in place (but vary widely and are not evaluated)
  - Need for universal and targeted approaches
  - Vulnerable groups identified here
  - Effectiveness of the same approaches may differ in different groups (Neal et al., 2016)
- Concerns about transition common but for most reduce rapidly post transition
  - Need for support to consider those elements of persistent concern for children (e.g. maintaining existing friendships) which are often not seen as priorities for schools (Keay et al., 2015)
- Primary teacher ratings on how they expected children to settle into secondary school associated with multiple indicators of post-transition adaptation (moderate effect sizes)
  - Brief 4-item questionnaire (START) free to use (Rice et al., 2015 and 2021)

# Future directions

- SHRN currently piloting an electronic survey with Year 6 pupils
  - Enable analysis of pupils concerns about transition among a cohort of children who have missed large chunks of in person KS2
- Expansion of the SHRN network downwards to include primary school will enable exploration of models of data sharing and collaborative working across school transition to support pupils

# Acknowledgements

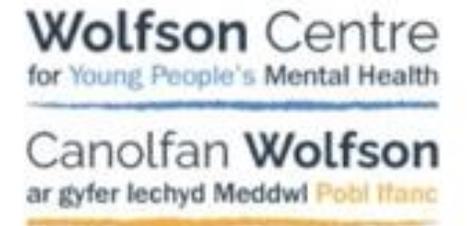
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- School Transition and Adjustment Research Study:



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