



## **Family, friendship and the transition to secondary school: the experiences of black, minority ethnic and white children.**

Around the age of 11, nearly all Scottish children transfer from primary to secondary school. This will involve changes to the size, location, class structure, curriculum, ethos of school as well as markedly altering children's daily routines and forms of social interaction, and may have significant effects on their social and family relationships.

In this briefing paper, we report research findings of a study carried out in 2002 and 2003 that examined the experiences and views of children making the transition from primary to secondary school and which asked about children's relationships with parents, peers and teachers as they negotiated that transition. It highlights comparisons of the experiences and views of black and minority ethnic children with white children's.

### **Key Points**

- Contrary to common beliefs that children find the transition to secondary school difficult and problematic, the children contributing to this study reported mainly positive experiences and outcomes
- There was much overlap in the experiences and viewpoints of children of all ethnic backgrounds, but also significant differences on some matters.
- Children reported that while their relationships with their parents had changed, their parents knew about most aspects of their lives, with Asian parents more likely to be well informed about school work, whereas white parents were more likely to know more about the children's friendships and social activities.
- Children from Asian Muslim backgrounds were more likely than others to report increased pressure from parents about school-work following the move to secondary school.
- Nearly all the children had at least several friends and all groups of secondary children reported the great significance of friendships in their lives and of making new friends at secondary school. However, responses from some children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds indicated that there were greater difficulties in peer relationships.
- Compared with white children, those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds tended to see friends less frequently and were less likely to bring friends home
- Secondary 1 pupils reported that they felt under less pressure to 'fit in' since they made the move to secondary school, although minority ethnic pupils were more likely to perceive difficulties in this area because, for example, of appearance.
- Some children and parents in general are often concerned that the transition to secondary school might increase the risk of bullying. However, the opposite was the case and bullying became less frequent.
- The transition to secondary school had a negative effect for both groups on how confident they felt, more so for children from minority ethnic backgrounds.
- The children were divided on whether primary or secondary teachers were more friendly and easier to talk to. Many felt that in secondary they were given more independence and treated more equally.

## The research

Most previous research on the move to secondary school has focused on the experience within school (Anderson et al. 2000; Galton et al. 1999; Stradling and MacNeil 2000; Zeedyk et al. 2003). Studies in the US and England have indicated that children from some minority ethnic backgrounds encounter greater difficulties than average at transition (Galton and Morrison 2000), but this issue has not been examined before in Scotland, which has a very different minority ethnic mix.

The study took the form of a school-based questionnaire survey of children in the West of Scotland, supplemented by a small number of focus group discussions with children and by data obtained from teachers and school reports. Three secondary schools together with three each of their feeder primary schools took part in the study. These were chosen because they were known to have high proportions of black and minority ethnic pupils. Pupils in Primary 7 and Secondary 1 classes completed questionnaires in May-June 2002. The Primary 7 pupils filled in a follow-up questionnaire in October 2002.

A total of 268 Primary 7 pupils participated in the first survey, of whom 173 also took part in the second stage of the study. A total of 343 pupils in Secondary 1 classes took part in the first round survey. Details of the more educational aspects of the transition are available elsewhere (Graham and Hill 2003).

## Ethnicity and household

Just under two thirds of the children in P7 identified themselves as white and nearly one third were from Pakistani Muslim backgrounds (See Table 1). Around one in twenty were from other minority ethnic backgrounds.

**Table 1: Broad groupings of ethnic identities within the sample**

	P7 sample	S1 sample
White	155 (58%)	256 (75%)
Asian	97 (36%)	73 (21%)
Other	16 (6%)	13 (4%)

The majority of the children (62% of Primary 7 pupils and 70% of Secondary 1 pupils) lived with both parents, although this was less likely to be the case for the white children, a larger number of whom were living with just one parent. Most of the pupils' families owned cars or vans and computers and most pupils received at least a small amount of pocket money. Just under one fifth of Asian children in Primary 7 (18%) rising to almost one quarter (24%) in Secondary 1 reported

working in the family business either to supplement pocket money or for no payment. Fewer than one in ten white children of both age groups reported that they were working in this way.

Overall about three quarters of all the children in the study said that English was the language spoken at home and one quarter reported another language. Almost all of the children who identified themselves as white said that the language spoken in the home was English, as did a sizeable number of those pupils who identified themselves as from another ethnic background. The two most common languages after English, were Urdu and Punjabi. Only very few pupils reported that their parents had problems speaking or reading and writing in English.

**Table 2: Languages spoken at home**

Language	Percentage of P7 pupils	Percentage of S1 pupils
English	73% (195)	86% (292)
Urdu	13% (36)	7% (25)
Punjabi	8% (20)	5% (16)
Arabic	2%(4)	0.3% (1)
Chinese	1% (2)	0.6% (3)
Other	4% (11)	0.3% (1)

## Relationships with family and friends

The children in this study described positive and communicative relationships with their parents. Most pupils stated that their mothers knew a lot about their lives. Fathers were reported to know less but were most informed about schoolwork. However, a higher proportion of Asian mothers and fathers than white parents were reported to have little or no knowledge of their children's lives. This tendency was marked in relation to parents' knowledge about who their children's friends were. However Asian mothers and fathers were said to be well informed about schoolwork, to a greater degree than white parents. More than four fifths (81%) of mothers and over three fifths of fathers (61%) were reported to know a lot.

Approximately three-quarters of the children indicated having at least three close friends (74% of Primary 7 pupils and 78% of Secondary 1 pupils) and that friendships were made across ethnic and religious groups. Pupils reported spending a lot of time with friends and engaging in a wide variety of activities with them, which varied most notably according to gender. The friendships of minority ethnic pupils were described as less close than white children's. For

example, children from minority ethnic backgrounds were less likely to see their friends everyday than white children (34% against 51% of white pupils) with nearly one in five Asian children compared to one in twenty white children stating that they saw their friends only once a week. In addition, Asian pupils were more likely to have friends who did not know anything about their home lives.

## School and home

Most children said they would talk about school-related problems mainly to parents, rather than friends or teachers. However higher proportions of Asian pupils reported that they did not communicate with their parents about matters such as bullying or how happy they were.

Most children said they asked for help with difficulties doing homework. More than four fifths turned to parents (85%: 83%), but teachers (70%: 62%), friends (40%: 58%) and other relatives (46%: 42%) were also important sources of help. The most striking difference in responses before and after the transition was that friends were significantly more likely to be asked for help by new Secondary 1 pupils.

Children from minority ethnic backgrounds reported increased parental pressure with regard to school work at secondary school; the parents of white children less so. Over two fifths agreed that their parents put on more pressure about schoolwork since they went to secondary school and nearly a quarter strongly so.

**Table 3: Reported parental pressure about school work**

Parents put more pressure on to do well at secondary school	White	Asian and other
	Agree	34%
Not agree or disagree	26%	15%
Disagree	35%	18%

Although teachers said that religion posed a problem for some Muslims integrating with classmates, the majority of Muslim pupils did not identify this as an issue for them. However a few Muslims at both primary and secondary school felt that their religion was not respected by teachers.

## The move to secondary school and peer relationships

Although some children are reportedly anxious that the transition to secondary school will weaken their existing friendships, the study found that the transition did not seem to have a negative impact upon relationships with classmates. In fact, the majority of new Secondary 1 pupils responded that they felt under less pressure to 'fit in' since they made the move to secondary school than formerly. Asian pupils reported feeling less peer pressure in relation to most issues than their white counterparts.

Some children and parents in general are concerned that the transition to secondary school might increase the risk of bullying. However, the opposite was the case in this study and bullying became less frequent. While more than three fifths (61%) had experienced teasing and bullying at primary school, only one in five (21%) had encountered this at secondary school.

Overall, secondary school children spoke positively about their friendships, and their importance in their lives. However, for minority ethnic children social difficulties in the transition were more common than for white children. A higher proportion of white pupils stated that they had made a large number of new friends than Asian and other ethnic groups reported. A larger proportion also said that they felt 'much closer' to classmates since they made the transition (22% of white pupils compared with 14% of Asian pupils). Nevertheless, the transition to secondary school had a negative effect for both groups on how confident they felt, more so for children from minority ethnic backgrounds. Specifically, while a higher majority of Asian pupils had reported feeling very confident with classmates before the transition, the trend was reversed once the children moved into their secondary class (37% of Asian pupils against 46% of white pupils). Minority ethnic pupils were also more likely than white pupils to perceive difficulties 'fitting in' with peers because, for example, of appearance.

## Views on teachers

The new secondary 1 pupils were asked to compare their new teachers with teachers at primary school. Answers were mainly positive, but with a significant number of children expressing more negative views. One quarter said they found secondary teachers were less friendly, but most did not. The majority agreed that secondary teachers gave them more independence and treated them more as equals. One third thought that it had been easier to talk to primary school teachers, mainly pointing to the greater amount of time spent with them during the day and over the course of a year. One fifth of pupils said it was easier to talk with secondary teachers, e.g. saying '*because they trust you more*' or '*they speak the same language*'.

**Table 4: Perceptions of teachers****Teachers at secondary school.....**

	<b>agree</b>	<b>neutral</b>	<b>disagree</b>
...are less friendly	25% (84)	30% (101)	45% (152)
...are more difficult to talk to	34% (112)	31% (104)	35% (118)
...trust you more	49% (166)	33% (112)	17% (58)
...talk to you as equals	61% (202)	27% (89)	13% (43)
...focus more on education	71% (238)	24% (80)	5% (18)
...give you more independence	76% (255)	17% (56)	8% (26)

N = 343 (a few had missing responses)

## Conclusion

The surveys of Primary 7 and Secondary 1 pupils reported here found that most children negotiated the social aspects of the move to secondary school satisfactorily, as was the case for educational matters. However a minority did encounter problems with peer relationships and felt less close to teachers. Black and minority ethnic children reported higher levels of peer difficulties and disappointment with their educational progress.

In many respects the experiences of white and black and minority ethnic pupils showed a similar range. However,

there were indications that the latter were more likely to have greater separation of different parts of their social networks, with lower levels of communication with family, peers and school. This might be interpreted as resulting from weaker social capital (with less trust and connectedness), but may also indicate differences in strategies for managing knowledge and communication about different aspects of their lives. Moreover, children from Asian backgrounds were more likely to be developing skills through work in family businesses. A qualitative study to understand better the processes underlying these quantitative data will be completed in 2004.

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This briefing was written by Catherine Graham and Malcolm Hill from the Glasgow Centre for the Child & Society at the University of Glasgow and edited for this briefing by Sarah Morton and Fran Wasoff, CRFR. An educational summary, with references, Graham C and Hill, M. (2003) Negotiating the Transition to Secondary School Spotlight 89, Edinburgh: SCRE, is available from <http://www.scre.ac.uk/spotlight/>

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