

Building Belonging Through Transition: Primary To Secondary

A Guide for Educators



Introduction

Transition from primary to secondary school marks one of the most pivotal moments in a young person's educational journey; a time rich with potential to shape their confidence, engagement and sense of place in the world of learning. This guide is crafted for busy educators – primary teachers, secondary form tutors, pastoral leads, SENCOs and Trust leaders – who want to transform that moment from a logistical hurdle into a belonging bridge, where every child steps forward feeling known, capable and excited for what lies ahead.

Whatever your role in the process, you'll find clear, actionable support here.

Part 1

Why belonging is central to transition' lays out the compelling evidence and child-centred reasoning, drawing directly on research to show how prioritising belonging drives attendance, engagement, wellbeing and progress, especially during those fragile first steps into Year 7. It equips you to make the case to leadership teams, parents or colleagues with confidence and clarity.

Part 2

Building belonging in practice' then delivers the hands-on toolkit: specific strategies for transition days, classroom activities for the first half-term, and year-long habits that sustain connection and success through Year 7 and beyond. From ready-to-use icebreakers and student profile templates to quiet ways of supporting vulnerable students, it is designed for immediate impact – whether you need a one-pager for your next team meeting or a full plan for September.

Choose whichever section speaks to your needs first. This guide is designed to equip you to support those making the transition because when schools get transition right, children don't just cope with secondary school... they thrive and achieve in it.

Belonging sits at the centre of school transition because it shapes whether children experience change as a threat or as an opportunity they are ready to meet.

Section 1

Belonging in focus

Why belonging is central to transition

Transition from primary to secondary school is one of the most significant changes a child experiences in education. It is not just a move to a different building; it is a shift in identity, relationships, expectations, routines, and confidence. When you look at transition through the lens of belonging, you begin to see that what matters most is not just whether a child knows where to go, but whether they feel they have a place when they get there.

At the point of transition, almost everything that has made school feel familiar is changing at once. Children move from being the oldest to the youngest, from one main classroom to many, from one key adult to multiple subject teachers. Friendships may be re-shuffled, travel routines altered, even uniforms and rules might look and feel different. Each of these shifts nudges a child to ask, consciously or not, "Do I still fit here? Am I the kind of person who belongs in this new environment?" That is why transition is not just a logistics task; it is a key moment for protecting belonging, attendance and support continuity.

For many students, this period brings genuine excitement and hope. They may be looking forward to new subjects, new clubs, bigger spaces and more independence. At the same time, it can also bring uncertainty, fear and a quiet question underneath it all: Will I belong here? When schools recognise that question and respond to it intentionally, transition becomes a powerful and positive experience. When they overlook it, even well planned practical arrangements can still leave children feeling adrift.

It is an invitation to see transition as a belonging moment, when schools can help children feel known, valued and ready to step into a new community with confidence. That perspective is optimistic and empowering: it suggests that belonging is something we can actively engineer through the messages we send, the routines we design and the relationships we build.



What the research is telling us

The data emerging from the last decade is clear and challenging, but it also points towards where schools can have the greatest impact. Research suggests that students' sense of belonging often declines when they transition into secondary school (especially in the first year) as peer acceptance and friendship become more central to whether they feel they fit in. In other words, just as students are trying to establish themselves socially in a much larger environment, their internal sense of "I belong at school" is at its most vulnerable.

From 'Every child achieving and thriving':

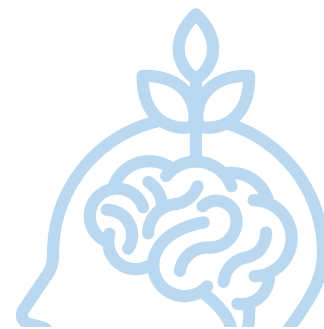
Pupil belonging - The scale of the challenge

Between 2014 and 2022, the proportion of children at secondary school reporting that they liked school "a lot" halved, and England saw a drop of over 20 percentage points in students' sense of belonging. This decline in school belonging is also seen internationally but is particularly stark for the UK and England, which both ranked poorly on this measure compared to other OECD countries in 2022. There are particular challenges for children transitioning into secondary, with more than one in four children beginning to disengage from school during Year 7.

Alongside this, recent analyses from organisations and researchers highlight that secondary students in England now rank among the least emotionally engaged with school compared with peers in many other countries. When you set these findings alongside persistent national concerns about attendance and engagement, the message is hard to ignore. If we want to shift those patterns, we have to start with how schools feel to the young people in them.

The good news is that student belonging is highly responsive to how adults behave. Studies of school climate and student belonging show that when students feel valued and included, they attend more regularly, participate more willingly and achieve more highly. Belonging acts as a protective factor for mental health, a buffer against stress and a driver of motivation. Belonging is the foundation that helps students feel safe enough to learn, connect and take healthy risks in a new environment. When children feel they belong they are more likely to engage, ask for help, build relationships and see secondary school as a place where they can succeed.

This foundation becomes even more important during transition, because so many other aspects of life are in flux. A strong sense of belonging can turn a daunting timetable into an exciting challenge, a new friendship group into an opportunity rather than a threat and a large school site into a place where a child feels they have a corner of their own.



How transition feels from a child's perspective

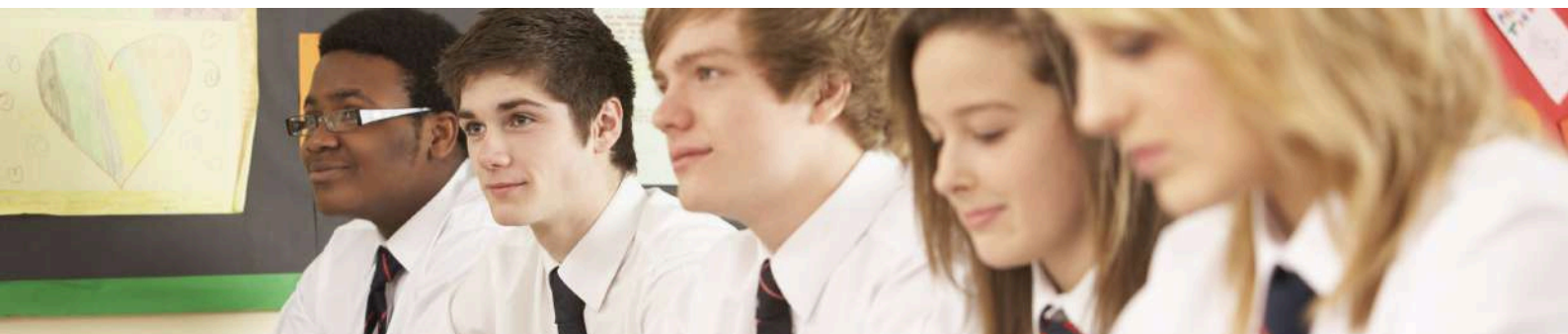
For Year 6 students, transition often arrives before they are emotionally ready. Developmentally, they are still in the process of working out who they are and where they fit and now they are being asked to do that in an unfamiliar system. Even confident children can worry about being lost, forgotten or judged. Others may already be carrying anxieties about friendship changes, academic expectations, behaviour systems, SEN support, uniform, travel or simply finding their way around.

From a child's perspective, these worries are not minor details: they are the practical expressions of the bigger question, "Will this be a place where I belong?" A student who fears getting lost might really be wondering, "Will anyone notice if I'm struggling?" A student who worries about their uniform might be wondering, "Will I be singled out for getting it wrong?" A student anxious about new behaviour systems may be asking, "Is this a place where someone like me can succeed?"

In this context, the role of adults is crucial. The role of adults is not to dismiss these worries, but to create conditions where students feel held through them. When staff acknowledge that it is normal to feel mixed emotions about transition, they immediately lower the pressure for children who think they should be 'excited' but secretly feel unsettled. When adults offer clear information, predictable routines and warm reassurance, they turn those worries into manageable challenges.

Belonging is not about telling students that everything will be perfect; it is about showing them that they will not have to face the imperfect parts on their own. A student who knows that there are trusted adults, clear processes and spaces where they are seen is much more able to cope with the inevitable bumps of Year 7. A strong transition process does more than prepare students for the next phase. It sends a message: you matter here, your story matters here and we have thought carefully about how to welcome you.

When students receive that message consistently - from primary teachers, from secondary staff, from family communication and from peers - they start to carry an internal sense that "I belong in school" which travels with them across settings.



Why belonging during transition matters for outcomes

Belonging matters not only because it feels good, but because it drives the things schools are accountable for: attendance, engagement, progress and wellbeing. When students experience transition as a belonging moment, they are more likely to come to school, to participate and to stay connected when things are tough.



At the level of attendance, students who feel they are known and valued are less likely to drift into irregular patterns. They see school as a place where they are missed when absent, rather than a place where their presence makes little difference. This is particularly important given the current concerns about post-pandemic absence and the higher rates of persistent absenteeism seen in secondary compared with primary.

At the level of engagement, belonging allows students to take academic risks. A child who feels secure is more likely to put their hand up, have a go at a challenging task or admit when they do not understand something. Because they trust that mistakes will not cost them their place in the group, they can lean into learning rather than staying on the sidelines. This is especially relevant in Year 7, when students are encountering new subjects and expectations and may be tempted to give up quickly if they feel exposed.

At the level of relationships, belonging shapes how students connect with peers and staff. A sense of belonging encourages prosocial behaviour, empathy and willingness to support others. It also protects against loneliness and bullying, problems which can otherwise spike around transition when social hierarchies are being renegotiated. When schools intentionally build a culture where every child has a place, they reduce the likelihood that anyone is left on the margins.

At the level of wellbeing, belonging is strongly linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression and higher levels of life satisfaction. Transition is a time when emotional wellbeing and mental health can be fragile. Building belonging into the way schools plan and communicate around transition helps to buffer children from feeling overwhelmed; it tells them that feeling unsure is not a sign of weakness, but a natural part of change that adults are ready to support.

All of this has implications for equity. The highlighted research notes that there are particular challenges for children transitioning into secondary, with more than one in four children beginning to disengage from school during Year 7. Disengagement is not evenly distributed; it is more likely among students with SEND, those who have experienced disadvantage and those who have already had interrupted engagement with school. For these students, a transition process grounded in belonging can make the difference between a new start and a fresh setback.



Belonging therefore needs to be understood not as an add-on, but as a central mechanism for closing gaps. When systems are designed to anticipate differences and to welcome each child as they are, they prevent some of the early ruptures that can widen into long-term inequalities.

Belonging as a shared professional focus

When you put all of this together, belonging emerges as a powerful shared focus for both primary and secondary staff. Primary schools are often the first place where transition anxiety can be noticed and softened. Primary schools should not remove every worry, but aim to help students leave with a strong sense of self, a realistic picture of the next setting and a belief that they can navigate change. The most effective preparation is not only practical; it is relational. Primary colleagues can see the small clues in Year 6 behaviour - the questions, the changes in mood, the comments about older siblings - and respond in ways that build confidence.

Secondary schools, meanwhile, set the tone for belonging long before students arrive in September. The message should be clear: we know you are coming, we have planned for you and we are ready to help you settle. Small details matter, because children often read welcome through the smallest signs. When transition communication feels human and consistent, when language says “you already have a place here and we will help you find it,” students start secondary school already feeling expected rather than tolerated. This also makes it easier for students to return to school after the summer holidays with less anxiety.

Families have an important part to play too. Families are key to the transition experience, especially for children who feel anxious or are less confident about change. When schools keep families informed not only about dates and uniform but about how they are supporting emotions and relationships, home can reinforce belonging rather than amplifying worry.

Across all of these roles, the common thread is that belonging is something adults can actively build. It is present in the way we talk about transition, in the routines we repeat, in the time we take to listen and in the thought we put into who might feel most vulnerable. Transition is one of the clearest opportunities schools have to show what belonging really means. It is in the welcome, the routines, the faces, the follow-up and the quiet persistence of adults who notice how children are coping.

Children do not need a perfect start -they need a thoughtful one. They need schools that understand that uncertainty is part of change and that belonging is something we build through deliberate action, not hopeful intention alone. If we want students to arrive in secondary school ready to learn, we must first help them arrive feeling that they matter. This is the real work of transition and how belonging begins.

Section 2

Building Belonging in Practice

Transition Implementation

If Part 1 makes the case for why belonging matters, this section is about how you actually build it into the everyday life of Year 7. The goal is not a handful of 'nice' transition days and then business as usual; it is a year-long approach where routines, relationships, curriculum and activities all quietly communicate the same message: you matter here and we have made space for you.

Think of this as a reflective toolkit. You can use it to plan transition days, design your first half-term in September and keep belonging alive as Year 7 grows in independence. It is written for classroom teachers, form tutors and pastoral leads who want transition to feel doable and joyful for young people, not overwhelming.

Transition days: turning first impressions into belonging

Transition day is often the first time children test out what secondary school actually feels like. It is 'proof of concept': does the school match what they've imagined? Does it feel human or faceless? Is this somewhere they can picture themselves? Transition day can be a turning point. It is often the first real test of whether the school feels welcoming in practice, not just on paper.

To make that day a belonging moment, not just a tour, build three threads through your planning: warmth, practice and voice.

Warmth: The first moments matter. If the day begins with confusion, queues, long instructions or lots of forms, students can quickly feel overwhelmed. A calm welcome, visible staff and clear signage set a very different tone. Have staff and student ambassadors greeting students by name where possible, using simple scripts like, "We're really glad you're here today – you don't need to know everything, that's our job." Small touches, such as colour-coded lanyards or house badges given at the door, can instantly give students a feeling of belonging to a group.

Practice: Transition day should demystify the practical aspects of school life. Transition day should help students answer the questions that matter most to them: Where do I go? Who can help me? What happens at lunch? Where are the toilets? How do lessons work? What if I get lost? Build in opportunities to practise:

- Walking the site following a simple map, with staff positioned at 'wobbly' points like stairwells or junctions.
- Moving between two sample lessons with a bell, so they experience the flow rather than just hearing about it.
- Queuing and eating in the dining space, including showing where to sit if you are not sure who to go with.

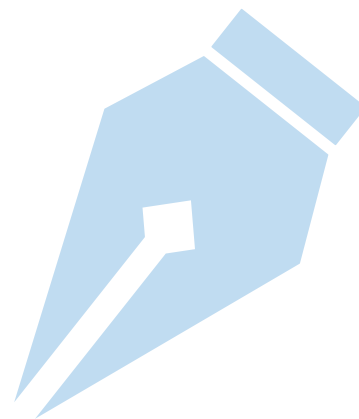
Avoid assuming that students understand secondary systems just because they have heard them described. Many children are hearing, processing and imagining these systems for the first time in a very concrete way, so practical rehearsal is more effective than explanation alone.

Voice: Belonging grows when students feel they can speak and be heard. Build in short, structured check-ins throughout the day: "What feels clear so far?" "What still feels uncertain?" "What would help you feel ready?" These can be done through mini whiteboards, post-it walls or small-group conversations, so quieter students also have routes to share. Listening is not a soft skill here; it is a transition strategy.



Activities for transition days that build real connection

The most effective transition activities are those that combine fun, structure and purpose. They should help students see what they have in common, practise navigating the school and feel successful in at least one thing before they leave.



Ideas for Transition Day Belonging Promoting Activities:

Common Ground Circles

Students stand or sit in a circle and step in if a statement applies to them, such as “I’ve moved house”, “I like football”, or “I feel nervous about starting something new”. This helps students see what they share and normalises mixed feelings. You can link some prompts directly to transition: “Step in if you’ve ever been new somewhere before”, followed by, “What helped you then?”

‘Human Bingo’ and ‘Find Someone Who’ (Printable on page16)

‘Human Bingo’ and ‘Find Someone Who’ get students moving and talking quickly in a structured way. You can adapt the prompts so they connect to belonging: “Find someone who likes the same subject as you”, “Find someone who prefers quiet spaces at break” or “Find someone who feels excited and nervous at the same time”. The key is that every student should be able to find multiple matches, reinforcing the message: *I’m not alone in how I feel.*

Belonging Walkabout

Turn the site tour into a scavenger hunt that foregrounds support and safety. Ask students to find: “A place I can go if I feel worried”, “A place I will go every day”, “A place that looks welcoming to me”. They can sketch or photograph these places (if appropriate) and discuss why they chose them; this helps them build a mental map of safety and belonging around the school.

Mini Team Challenge

Short, low-stakes team tasks – like building the tallest paper tower or solving a simple problem in groups – give students small experiences of success together. Emphasise cooperation over competition: “Your goal is that everyone in your group feels they contributed”. This sets a tone that in this school, we look out for one another.

Finishing the day by reinforcing the message that nerves are normal, that staff are ready to support and that students have already shown they can cope with the new environment is key. The aim is not to cover everything in one day. The aim is to reduce fear, build familiarity and leave students feeling, ‘I can do this.’

The first half-term in Year 7

Routines, relationships and early success

Belonging does not automatically follow a successful transition day; it is built in the routines and relationships of the first weeks. The first days of September shape the tone for the whole year. Students are looking for clues about whether they will cope, whether they will be noticed and whether the adults around them understand what this move feels like. Belonging is built in routines, not slogans.

A helpful way to think about the first half-term is through three priorities: re-teaching, relationships and early success.

Re-teach everything calmly

Even if students have experienced a successful transition day, they will still need routines revisited and reinforced in September. Do not assume that one experience has made them ready. The first days should be treated as a settling-in period where expectations are taught clearly and repeatedly. Model and practise:

- How to enter the classroom, where to sit, how to ask for help and what to do when they finish work.
- How to manage books, homework and equipment in a way that feels manageable, not overwhelming.
- How to navigate common spaces like corridors in a calm, safe way.

Repetition is not a sign of low expectations; it is a sign of supportive teaching. When routines are clear, students can spend less energy worrying about what to do next and more energy focusing on relationships and learning. The sense of ease supports belonging.

Prioritise relationships before pace

It can be tempting to move quickly into content, assessment and behaviour expectations in the first week. Those things matter, but relationships matter first. Students learn better when they feel known, respected and emotionally settled.



You can build relationships without sacrificing learning by:

- Starting lessons or tutor time with quick, low-stakes sharing questions such as “What makes a class feel welcoming?” or “What helps you feel confident in a new place?”
- Using ‘Question of the Day’ as a routine – keeping questions light, inclusive and optional to answer.
- Building in opportunities for students to work in different pairs and small groups, with you intentionally watching who ends up on the margins.

Some children settle silently and appear fine while still feeling unsettled. Adults need to notice not only who is visible, but who is still finding their feet. Slowing down enough to make those observations is part of the work of belonging.

Create early success

Belonging grows when students experience competence. In the first few days, build in tasks that allow every child to feel capable. This could look like:

- Simple starter tasks that everyone can achieve, such as short retrieval quizzes based on primary content or quick wins in your subject.
- Opportunities to contribute something to the class – a thought, a question or an idea for how to make the room feel welcoming.
- Praising effort explicitly, not just outcomes: “You kept going even when that felt confusing – that’s exactly what we need in secondary”.

Simple success points might include navigating the building independently, completing a starter task, contributing to a discussion or remembering a routine. These small achievements matter because they build confidence. Confidence, in turn, supports connection.



Belonging across the whole of Year 7

Habits, activities and student voice

If belonging is to remain strong, it needs to be woven into the ongoing life of the year group, not just the opening weeks. This can be done through small, regular practices rather than large, occasional events.

Make check-ins normal

Even if students have experienced a successful transition day, they will still need routines revisited and reinforced in September. Do not assume that one experience has made them ready. The first days should be treated as a settling-in period where expectations are taught clearly and repeatedly. Model and practise:

- How to enter the classroom, where to sit, how to ask for help and what to do when they finish work.
- How to manage books, homework and equipment in a way that feels manageable, not overwhelming.
- How to navigate common spaces like corridors in a calm, safe way.

Repetition is not a sign of low expectations; it is a sign of supportive teaching. When routines are clear, students can spend less energy worrying about what to do next and more energy focusing on relationships and learning. The sense of ease supports belonging.

Use student voice to shape the year

Students are more likely to feel that they belong when they see their experiences influencing what happens next. Build in opportunities for Year 7 to give feedback on:

- Which activities have helped them feel part of the school.
- What still feels confusing about routines or systems.
- Ideas for making the school more welcoming for the next cohort.

You might run a simple survey at the end of the first half-term, followed by a Year 7 forum where a small group discusses the results with pastoral staff. When changes are made based on that feedback – even small ones – name them explicitly: “You told us you wanted a quieter space at lunch; we’ve opened up this room”. That visibility reinforces the message that their voices matter.



Plan belonging-focused activities through the year

Alongside curriculum, you can thread in regular activities that keep reinforcing identity, connection and shared purpose.

For example:

'All About Me' Coat of Arms and 'Future Me' letter (Printable page 18)

Early in the term, students create an 'All About Me' coat of arms with sections such as 'things I enjoy,' 'what I'm good at,' 'what matters to me,' and 'something I want others to know.' Later in the year, they can revisit these and reflect on what has changed. A 'Future Me' letter at the start of Year 7, where students write about hopes, worries and goals, can be sealed and returned at the end of the year as a powerful reflection on growth.

Collaborative Creative Projects

Art, drama and writing provide alternative routes into belonging. Collaborative murals, class storytelling projects or shared displays where each student contributes something can become visual anchors of community – reminders on the walls that 'we built this together.'

Community-building games

Activities like 'Group Story Chain', 'Would You Rather?' with reasons, 'Stand Up If', and 'Partner Portraits' are more than icebreakers: they are opportunities to practise listening, speaking and noticing one another as the year goes on. The most effective activities are the ones that feel safe, structured and purposeful rather than overly competitive. Short, repeated use over the first term is often better than one big 'bonding day.'

Build continuity and protect dignity for vulnerable students

Every child deserves belonging, but some students need more deliberate support to experience it. The transition to secondary school can expose hidden vulnerabilities, especially where there are social, emotional, learning or family factors at play. Schools should not wait for these students to struggle before acting.

Use student profiles well (Student facing printable page 17)

Simple student profile forms (completed in Year 6 and updated in Year 7) can highlight strengths, interests, support strategies and worries. This information allows tutors and teachers to personalise their welcome and build on what already works, rather than starting from zero. Students settle better when something from primary school travels with them.



Notice the quiet signals

Not all anxiety looks obvious. Some children become very chatty, while others become very silent. Some appear compliant but disengaged. Some avoid asking for help because they do not want to stand out. Adults need to read behaviour carefully and respond with curiosity, not just correction. Short, private conversations framed around curiosity (“I’ve noticed... how can we make this easier?”) help students feel seen rather than judged.

Protect dignity

Support should always be discreet and respectful. Students are more likely to accept help when it does not make them feel different in a negative way. Avoid spotlighting who receives extra support; focus instead on normalising help-seeking as something everyone does at times. Belonging cannot be built by making vulnerable students feel like problems to be solved. It is built when schools show that every child is worthy of care, patience and attention.

Bringing it together: A year-long belonging mindset

Across transition days, the first weeks and the rest of Year 7, the same principles apply: give learners a voice, build positive relationships, support familiarity with the site, involve all stakeholders and anticipate the needs of those most at risk. When these principles shape everyday practice, transition becomes less of a leap and more of a bridge.

Children do not need a flawless Year 7. They need adults who understand that uncertainty is part of change and who treat belonging as deliberate work, not an accident. By embedding belonging into the fabric of transition and early secondary life, you help students move from asking “Will I belong here?” to knowing “This is a place where I matter and I can do this.”



Name: _____

Human Bingo Card



Prefers sitting near the front in lessons

Likes reading (fiction, comics, magazines)

Has ever felt nervous about a new school year

Can wiggle both ears at once

Likes working better in pairs than big groups

Thinks pineapple belongs on pizza

Renames their teachers in their head

Has a go-to person they ask for help

Knows a good joke to cheer people up

Gets excited AND worried about big changes

Favourite food is chocolate

Helps friends when they feel worried

Has a favourite football team

Can play a musical instrument

Wears socks that don't match on purpose

Has a pet



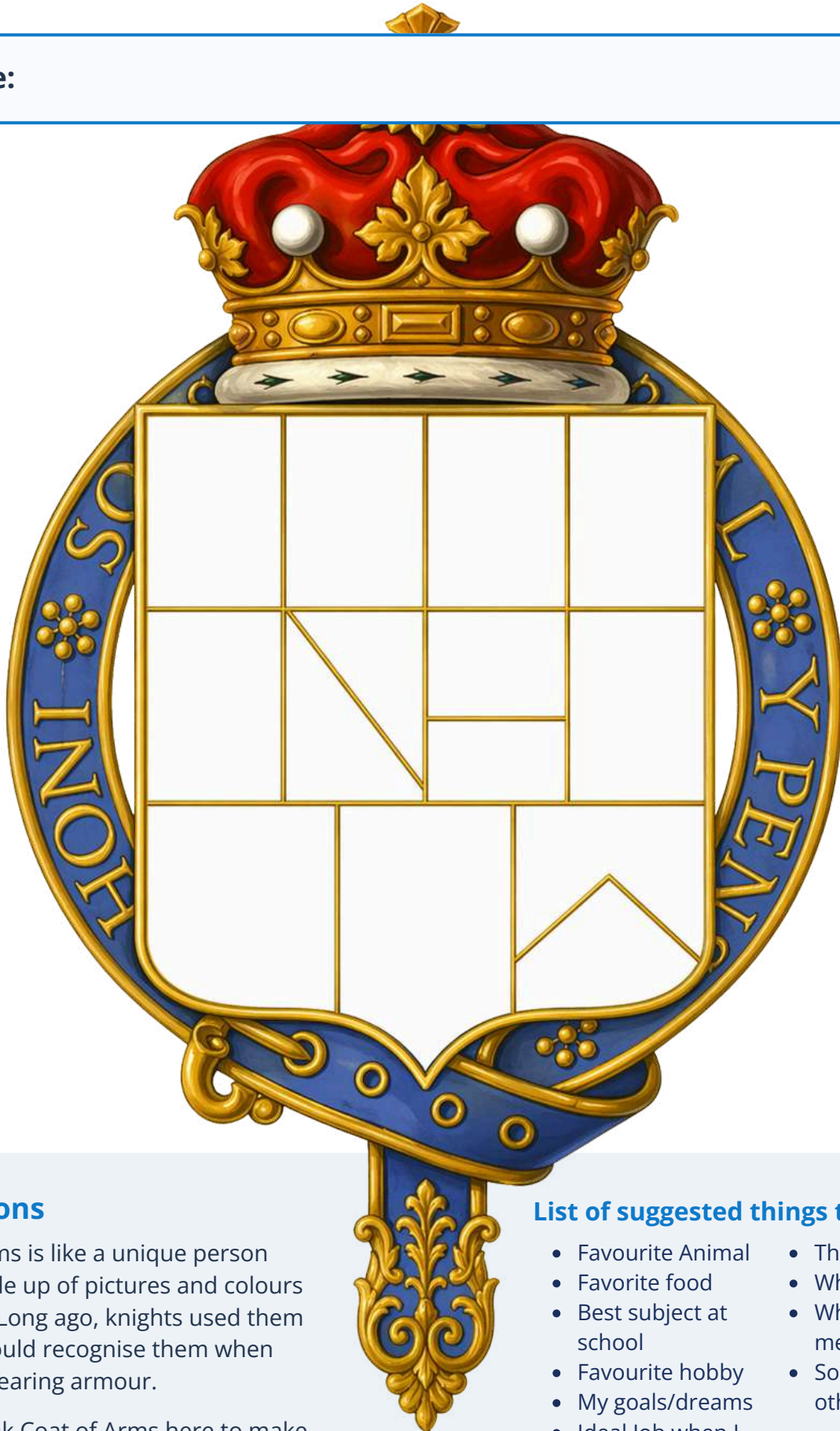
Name:

Primary School Name:

Things I like			
Things I don't like			
What I like to be called			
What I like about school			
What I find tough about school			
What I would like my new teachers to know about me			
What I am looking forward to about moving to secondary school			
Things that are on my mind / worried about secondary school	<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <input type="radio"/> Making friends <input type="radio"/> Getting lost <input type="radio"/> Finding the toilet <input type="radio"/> Getting detention </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> <input type="radio"/> Asking for help when I am stuck <input type="radio"/> Getting my lunch <input type="radio"/> Losing my pencil case <input type="radio"/> </td> </tr> </table> <div style="text-align: right; margin-top: 10px;">  </div>	<input type="radio"/> Making friends <input type="radio"/> Getting lost <input type="radio"/> Finding the toilet <input type="radio"/> Getting detention	<input type="radio"/> Asking for help when I am stuck <input type="radio"/> Getting my lunch <input type="radio"/> Losing my pencil case <input type="radio"/>
<input type="radio"/> Making friends <input type="radio"/> Getting lost <input type="radio"/> Finding the toilet <input type="radio"/> Getting detention	<input type="radio"/> Asking for help when I am stuck <input type="radio"/> Getting my lunch <input type="radio"/> Losing my pencil case <input type="radio"/>		

All about me coat of arms

Name:



Instructions

A coat of arms is like a unique person "badge" made up of pictures and colours on a shield. Long ago, knights used them so people could recognise them when they were wearing armour.

Use the blank Coat of Arms here to make your own.

List of suggested things to include:

- Favourite Animal
- Favorite food
- Best subject at school
- Favourite hobby
- My goals/dreams
- Ideal Job when I am 30 years old
- Things I enjoy
- What I'm good at
- What matters to me
- Something I want others to know

Supercharge Your Belonging Strategy with Satchel Pulse Inclusion Toolkit

Ready to take your transition belonging work from great to transformational?

Satchel Pulse offers a comprehensive Inclusion Toolkit designed specifically for schools – packed with ready-to-use resources that complement everything in this guide.

Perfect for your next steps:

- ✓ Baseline Year 7 belonging survey (Week 1)
- ✓ Monitor vulnerable students discreetly
- ✓ Evidence belonging to governors/MAT
- ✓ Plan targeted interventions from real data



Book a 15-minute demo to see how Satchel Pulse turns your belonging insights into actionable school improvement – because great transitions deserve great tools.

Book a meeting

