

7 tips to help teens successfully transition to high school

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In the next two months thousands of children will take one more step toward a significant rite of passage: they will transition from being middle school or junior high students to becoming full-fledged high schoolers. This transition for kids is scary – the fear of anonymity, unfamiliar surroundings and higher expectations all play a central role in the anxiety leading up to the start of one's high school career. There are things, however, that parents can do to assist with this transition.

1. Listen

Parents should not discount their children's fears by just telling them "it will be all right." Change can be frightening. Parents should reassure their kids that they will not be alone in this process. Children at this age need emotional security, support and a listening ear. Your child is anxious about this transition and wants to know that you are an ally.

2. Get involved

When students are involved with extracurricular activities, such as theatre, art club or sports, it helps promote belonging. Encouraging involvement in organized school activities fosters teamwork and a sense of place, which ultimately leads to confidence. And confidence comes with inclusion.

3. Help your child learn the ropes

Many school districts have freshman orientation programs that allow time for incoming freshmen to get oriented to the physical plant. Schools, for example, usually allow students to come in and try out locker combinations, locate classrooms and get comfortable with their new surroundings. For students who have their schedules, parents can suggest that they walk through the building as if they were coming and going from classes.

If students have to take a bus to school, parents should help them plan in advance. Students should know where to get on, when to get on and where to get off. This is especially important for students who have to take multiple buses to school.

4. Eliminate stress by focusing on details

The more attention that parents pay to small details, the easier things will be for a student on day one. For example, most schools mail students their new schedules over the summer. Parents should look over their child's schedule to ensure it appears to be correct. No matter how much little Billy tries to coerce his parents into believing he is supposed to have three gym classes, he shouldn't. Scheduling mistakes do happen, and if there is a problem counselors are usually available a couple of weeks prior to the start of classes to get these issues resolved. Addressing any scheduling errors early can save your child from waiting in line and missing classes while his/her schedule is changed.

5. Prepare for the summer brain drain

Almost every student loses a little ground over the summer. However, if your child has done poorly in a subject, you should try to help him/her find a related enrichment activity over the summer. This will increase your child's self-esteem and help prepare your student academically for the start of the school year.

6. Adjustments to curriculum take time

The higher academic standards of high school and increased competition will take some time and adjustment. Often students earn their lowest GPA freshman year, and then begin to figure things out. When I interview students and ask the question "if you could start high school over again, what would you do differently?" many students answer that they would take freshman year more seriously. Some freshmen don't even understand that their freshman grades are part of the high school transcript that is submitted when they apply to college.

7. Know when to seek help

After the first couple of weeks, if your child is having debilitating anxiety or is abnormally worried about school, parents must seek help and get an intervention. Many students will exhibit uneasiness and a decrease in self-esteem, but adjustment problems lasting longer than a few weeks may require special help.

Parents know their children and know when they are having drastic mood swings or acting uncharacteristically. If you notice a change in your child's eating or sleeping habits, it's time to talk with someone.

During this time never forget to love your children unconditionally. While they are crossing over into adulthood, understand that change is hard and their fears are real. Students today are more stressed out than they have ever been. It's a reflection of what is going on in our communities and our society. We have so many complex problems – including heightened economic pressures, changes in family structure, persistent violence, cyber-bullying, etc. – but there are also more resources to deal with these problems than we had 20 years ago.

Parents, teachers, counselors and school leaders need to work collaboratively to help promote a favorable school adjustment. Nobody can do it alone.

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