

How to Help Your Teens Transition to High School

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At this time of year, it can sometimes be hard to tell who's more excited about returning to school, youth or their parents.

But the excitement for kids about new friends, teachers and ventures can be overshadowed by anxiety and stress, particularly if they're moving into high school.

The sheer size of a high school building can be overwhelming to the uninitiated. The potential loss of social status among a larger group of peers and the increased number of teachers — each having different styles and expectations — can be intimidating for newcomers. Add to this the hormonal changes that accompany puberty and drive physical, emotional and cognitive growth, and the demands on young people can be overwhelming.

In high school, teachers tend to stay in one place while the students rotate through their classrooms. This can be difficult for students who are used to having a homeroom teacher for the majority of their subjects.

Some high schools have instituted homerooms for core subjects such as language arts and social studies. These allow students to connect daily to at least one key adult who knows them and ostensibly has their best interests in mind. Regrettably, this practice is rare past Grade 8.

Fortunately, parents and their children can take some steps to make the transition easier. As an educator and a psychologist from the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary, I offer you a few simple strategies:

1. Get to know the school space

Familiarity helps to reduce anxiety. If possible, youth should try to tour the school halls in advance to get to know where specific rooms are located. Of course, it helps if they can have a school map to help them navigate. It's always important to learn where key spaces are such as the administrative offices, washrooms, cafeteria and water fountains.

2. Make the leap with a few friends

The adolescent years are significant in the transition from relying on parents to learning to trust and rely on peers. During this time, peer socialization becomes critically important and being part of a peer collective can make the transition smoother while helping to ease stress. Confidence in social interactions with peers contributes to positive self-evaluation and successful school transitions.

Youth can identify friends from their previous school who plan to attend the same high school. If they live close together, they can travel together to school or plan to meet up before school, at lunch breaks and during times when they might not have scheduled

classes. Among other things, this will give them the opportunity to share and compare experiences — essentially normalizing what they are going through, while brainstorming solutions to challenges they might be facing.

3. Identify clubs and interest groups

These hobby-based groups tend to be smaller than regular classes and have supportive teacher sponsors with an interest in the subject area. This can be an easy way to connect with others who have similar interests, while building a support network at school.

Since the high school years are ones of exploration, novelty seeking and even risk-taking, such groups offer an opportunity to explore interests in a safe environment.

4. Help with planning and organization

In high school, there's an increased expectation for students to take responsibility for planning and organizing materials for themselves, as well as getting to class on time, handing in homework and assignments and coming prepared for quizzes and exams. This also includes managing class materials, unique clothing for sports and clubs, musical instruments and other school equipment. Most schools offer a personal planner booklet that can help students to overcome some of these challenges. However, most will require support to be able to use and maintain them properly.

It's true that adolescence is a time of cognitive growth and consolidation. This comes from the myelination of nerves (insulation for faster signals) and the pruning of neural networks (specialization for efficient brain function) that improve thinking capacities. However, the adolescent brain keeps developing well into the early 20s. Higher order thinking, planning and foresight can take time to develop.

5. Organize a study schedule

Family support and parental engagement are linked to academic success. It's important to start building study habits early, even if there is no assigned homework to do. Students should plan for 30 to 60 minutes of study, homework and project work per night. It is often best to schedule a regular time, such as just before or after the family dinner.

Whatever the schedule, it's also important to take breaks after school. And try to plan time carefully so that such work does not drag on and become demotivating.

6. Monitor stress

Even after settling into the new environment, getting to know teachers and their expectations and collecting a group of friends, the level of stress in high school can still be intense. Schools can be competitive environments. Exams (particularly high-stakes final exams) can be stressful to the point of debilitation. And social demands can be overwhelming.

Challenges like these can be exacerbated if students have unique needs such as physical or sensory impairments, learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or a mental health condition such as anxiety or depression. In cases where such challenges are known in advance, it is important to connect to the receiving school's specialized supports, which often come in the form of guidance and counselling services and accessibility services.

Kids should also be monitored to ensure they're coping with the demands being placed on them. Their ability to cope can change day to day and month to month, and parents should be ready to offer support when it's needed. In some cases, stress can become overwhelming or persistent to the point of immobilization. If they aren't experiencing reduced anxiety within a month, they likely need help.

If so, specialized professional support may be needed to identify the underlying problem and intervene appropriately. School counsellors can be a good place to start, while family doctors can often point the way toward a good child psychologist or counselling specialist.

With the right kind of planning and support, the transition to high school can be a life-changing and empowering one that can set your youth on the path toward an amazing future. Start now to plan for success.

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