

Adjusting to High School

High school is the start of many exciting and challenging changes in your teenager's life. In high school, students have more freedom and choices with their course selection and schedules. They also face increased academic pressure since grades now "count" toward the future. Your teenager may face added pressure from peers to try alcohol and drugs. It's normal for ninth-graders to feel overwhelmed by all these changes. Here are some ways to ease your teenager's adjustment to high school both socially and academically.

At school and at home

Find out about freshman orientation for students before the school year begins. Find out if there is also an orientation or information night for parents and try to attend it.

Touch base with your child's school counsellor early on. Your teenager will need to make important academic decisions during the first year of high school, such as what courses to take and which level of courses to pursue over the next four years, including Advanced Placement (AP) or honours classes. Your teenager's school counsellor can explain the different choices and requirements and help you determine if your child is taking the right classes.

Stay involved in your child's school life. Typically, parental involvement drops off by high school as teens naturally become more independent. Experts agree, however, that parental involvement is key to school success. It's just as important to stay involved now as it was when your child was younger. You may have to approach this differently as your child matures and becomes more self-sufficient. Here are some ways to stay involved:

- Attend a meeting of the parent-teacher organization early in the school year. This is a good way to become familiar with school policies and requirements and to share your questions and concerns with other parents.
- Attend back-to-school night, which is usually held early in the fall. It is a great opportunity to meet your child's teachers.
- If you have concerns about your child's academic performance, call the school office to schedule a parent-teacher conference. Try to attend or volunteer to help with school-related functions such as sports events, field trips, plays, concerts, or parent committees. This will show your child you care, help you stay informed about what's going on, and allow you to meet and talk with other parents.
- Volunteer to speak at a career day or in class about your job, hobby, or area of expertise. This will help you get to know some of the staff and students at the school.

Support your teenager, and help him learn to handle the pressure that comes with being in high school. With the added demands of more homework, exams, term papers, and school projects, your teenager may feel a good deal of pressure during the transition to high school. Be supportive—sometimes simply acknowledging the pressure is enough. Model healthy ways to handle stress in your own life.

Give your child freedom to choose what to wear. Some teens feel more comfortable wearing the same fashions as their classmates, while other teens will choose more unique styles to express their identity. You may need to set some limits on the price and types of clothing, but try to give your teenager a fair amount of control over what to wear.

Get to know your teenager's friends. Friends will play a big role throughout high school and will have an effect on your child's school performance. If your teenager's friends like school and are motivated to achieve, chances are your teenager will be too. Though you may not always like all of your teenager's friends, it's important to welcome them into your home. Get to know who they are, what their values are, and how they think.

Help your teenager learn to manage her time. Homework demands increase dramatically in high school and so do social activities. Your teenager may need help learning to balance the demands of sports, clubs, homework, social life, free time, and possibly a job. Help your teenager make choices and set priorities.

Help your teenager develop homework skills. Your child may need help with time management, prioritizing, setting goals, study and organization skills, tackling tough subjects, and breaking big assignments down into parts. If you can't provide this help on your own, you might consider seeking help from a teacher, school counsellor, or tutor. Tutors can work specifically on organizational skills and time management. Study groups are another helpful strategy for many students, as long as the students in the group are well motivated. Summer programs offering academic assistance may also be available.

Encourage participation in extracurricular activities. Whether it's joining a math club, playing on the hockey team, or volunteering in a soup kitchen, encourage your child to get involved in activities outside the classroom. Teens who participate in school clubs, sports, or activities are more likely to feel positively engaged in the school community. Extracurricular involvement is also a plus for college applications.

Set a limit on how many hours a week your child is allowed to work if he has a part-time job. Experts recommend that teenagers work no more than 15 to 20 hours a week during the school year. Working more than this affects grades and school performance. If possible, limit job hours to afternoons and weekends, rather than evenings, during the school year.

Respect your teenager's privacy. It's fine to ask questions, but try not to pry. Remember, this is the time when your teenager is trying to define who he is; respecting privacy is very important. Think carefully before going through belongings in your teenager's room without asking, unless there are signs of trouble. Always remember to knock before entering.

Try to have regular meals together as a family. Research shows that the more families sit down together for meals, the better children do in school and in life. Your family may have a hectic schedule, but encourage family members to "unplug" and relax over regular meals together. This is an opportunity to have conversations about everyday events in your teen's life and keep the family bonds strong.

Be sure your teenager gets enough sleep. Experts recommend an average of nine hours of sleep a night for adolescents. This is an ideal that's often difficult to achieve. Teenagers have different internal clocks than adults do, and they have lots of demands on their time. Still, it's worth trying to coax your teenager to bed at a reasonable hour. Studies show that teenagers who get close to this amount of sleep do better in school.

Be sure your teenager gets regular exercise. Physical activity is important for good physical and mental health. Regular exercise, such as bicycling, walking, running, rollerblading, or swimming, helps reduce stress, keeps the body fit, and can be lots of fun.

Encourage independent and responsible behavior. Once in high school, teenagers need to learn to make responsible decisions on their own. You can help by trusting your teenager to make

her own choices. Ask for her opinions about things. Involve your teenager in family decisions, and listen to what she has to say. You won't always agree with her decisions—she may make mistakes, but that's how she will learn.

Negotiate rules together with your teenager, and go over them regularly. Dating, curfews, internet use, and traveling in cars with teenage drivers are just some of the issues you face as the parent of a teenager. Find a time to talk through these and other important issues together and come to an understanding about family rules. Be very clear about consequences. One important rule you might enforce is, "You have to call me whenever you are going to be late." Be sure your child knows you are always available for a ride. A policy some parents have is, "I'll pick you up no matter what, no questions asked." Questions can wait until morning.

Spend time with your teenager. For parents and teenagers, it's all too easy to get caught up with the friction in a relationship. That's why it's important to try to spend time with your teenager just enjoying each other. Make a conscious effort not to deal with issues, problems, or discipline during these times together. Instead, do something together that you all enjoy, such as going to the beach, to the movies, for a bike ride, or to a baseball game.

Watch for signs of stress. Stress can affect social relationships, schoolwork, and a child's happiness and emotional wellbeing. Some signs of stress include headaches; stomachaches; eating or sleeping too much or too little; loss of interest in school or friends; or irritable, angry, or aggressive behaviour. Here are ways to reduce the stress in your child's life:

- Do what you can to be more available when your teenager is feeling stressed. Try to simplify your family life so you can focus on your child's needs.
- Avoid setting expectations that are too high for your child and comparing him to his friends or siblings. Help your child find support from teachers, mentors, relatives, and other adults in your community. Research shows that children who have positive connections with adults are more likely to have an easier time with adolescence and have greater success in school.

If your teenager is having a difficult time adjusting to high school, seek help from a teacher, school counsellor, school psychologist, or adviser. Don't wait for a call from school or until the problem escalates. Signs that your child might be having trouble in school include poor attendance, poor grades, eating disorders, marked weight loss or weight gain, prolonged sadness, depression, or increased discipline problems. Teachers, school psychologists, and school counsellors can help, so call the school right away if you think your child is experiencing any of these problems.

Ways to ease your adjustment as a parent

Remember that some friction comes with having a freshman. Some amount of parent-adolescent conflict is normal and healthy.

Try not to feel rejected if your teenager is shutting you out. This behaviour doesn't mean your teenager has stopped loving and needing you. Continue giving your guidance and support. Your teenager values what you have to say, even if he won't admit it.

Keep your sense of humour. Tell jokes at dinner. Rent a funny movie and watch it together. A sense of humour is a helpful tool in keeping lines of communication open in your family.

Transitions can be hard no matter what age you are. The more love, support, and encouragement you give your teenager during this first year of high school, the more successful the years ahead will be for all of you.

© LifeWorks 2022



Dr. Mary Beth Klotz
Educational Consultant
Last Reviewed Jan 2018

Mary Beth Klotz, PhD, is a Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP) and an educational consultant. Previously, Dr. Klotz worked as a school psychologist and special education teacher in a variety of public school settings, and served as the Director of Educational Practice for the National Association of School Psychologists.