

Adjusting to High School

Overview

Helping your teenager adjust to high school.

- At school and at home
- Ways to ease your adjustment as a parent

High school is the start of many exciting and challenging changes in your teenager's life. In high school, students have more freedom to choose their own courses 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 before the school year begins.* There will likely be an orientation for freshmen and new students. Find out if there is also an orientation or information night for parents and try to attend it.
- *Touch base with your child's adviser or guidance counselor 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, including Advanced Placement or honors classes. Your teenager's guidance counselor 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, mostly because parents feel pressured by time constraints and aren't sure their children want them to be involved. 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 independent. Here are some ways to stay involved:
 - Attend a meeting of the parent-teacher organization early on in the year. This is a good way to become familiar with school policies and requirements and to share your questions and concerns with other parents. Consider signing up to work on a committee. If there is no parent-teacher organization, consider starting one.
 - Go to Back-to-School Night, which is usually held early in the fall.
 - Attend parent-teacher conferences. If you aren't sure how to schedule one, call the school office to find out.
 - Try to attend school-related functions like sports events, plays, or concerts. This will show your child you care and help you stay informed about what's going on.

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- Chaperone a school dance or field trip. It doesn't necessarily have to be with your child's class.
- Volunteer to speak to a high school class about your job, hobby, or area of expertise. This will help you get to know some of the people and students at the school.
- *Support and help your teenager 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.
- *Give your child freedom to choose what to wear.* It's important to most teenagers to fit in with their peers. One way they do this is by wearing the same fashions as their classmates. You may need to set some limits on 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, chances are your teenager will too. Though you may not always like all of your teenager's friends, it's important to invite 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. This may include deciding to temporarily drop an activity. Learning to balance work and free time takes practice.
- *Help your teenager develop homework skills.* Your child may need help with time management, prioritizing, setting goals, study 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 counselor, or tutor. Study groups and tutoring are helpful for many students. Summer programs offering academic assistance are also available.
- *Encourage participation in extracurricular activities.* Whether it's joining a math club, playing on the hockey team, or working in a soup kitchen, encourage your child to get involved in activities outside the classroom. Kids who participate in clubs, sports, or activities where they feel a part of something feel better about themselves. 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

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a week during the school year. Working more than this affects grades and school performance. If possible, try to 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 she is; respecting privacy is very important. Think carefully before going into 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 try to fit in regular meals together. Even a few times a week can make a difference.
- *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 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 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 his own choices. Ask for his opinions about things. Involve your teenager in family decisions, and listen to what he has to say. You won't always agree with his decisions -- he may make mistakes, but that's how he will learn.
- *Negotiate rules together with your teenager and go over them regularly.* Dating, curfews, Internet use, and traveling in the car 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

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together. Instead, do something together that you both 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 well-being. 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 behavior. 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. Focus on who your child is, and not on what you wish he would be.
 - 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.
- *If your teenager is having a difficult time adjusting to high school, seek help from a teacher, school counselor, 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 and counselors 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 behavior 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 she won't admit it.
- *Keep your sense of humor.* Tell jokes at dinner. Rent a funny movie and watch it together. A sense of humor is one of the best tools you have in keeping lines of communication open in your family.

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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.

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