

Starting High School

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Starting high school can be a very exciting new step for young people. It can also be very confusing and quite scary for some teenagers. There are many big changes from primary (elementary) school. Many teenagers "go backwards" for a while as they learn to adjust all the new changes.

Changes at high school

- Young people who have been at the top of the school in primary school feel important and valued. When they start high school it is usually a much bigger place with many more students and they are at the bottom rather than the top of the school.
- In primary school students often have only one teacher to relate to for most of their subjects, and one classroom. At high school they usually have different teachers and classrooms for every subject and this can be very confusing.
- Their friends may be going to different schools or be in different classes so they may need to make new friends.

Stresses on young people

When they first start high school young people will hopefully be enjoying the new challenge but there are some stresses that you may need to be aware of. They may feel:

- lost and confused before they orient themselves to the new situation
- grief for their old school and old friends
- lonely and unhappy until they make new friends
- anxious that they will not be able to cope with the new demands for learning
- worried that they will not be "one of the group"
- worried that they will not live up to their parents' expectations
- tired and irritable with all the new demands.

Behavior

Your young person may show stress in the following ways:

- being irritable and short tempered
- being disagreeable or not wanting to talk to you
- sometimes wanting to be treated as an adult, other times wanting to be a child again
- changing behavior in order to impress, e.g. silliness or rebelling against parents
- tummy aches, headaches or not wanting to go to school.

What you can do

What you can do in advance

- If it is possible, choose a school with a good program to help children make the change. Some schools have a "buddy system" to help new students link in with the ones who have been there before.
- Start preparing your child before she finishes primary school. Check whether it is possible for her to visit the school beforehand. Go to open days if they are provided.
- If it is available go to a meeting before school starts so you and she can meet the teachers and find out how the system works.
- Set up your own "buddy system". Find out the names of some students who will be going to the same school as your young person and arrange for them to meet in the holidays. If they don't know each other make it easy, e.g. by inviting the family to a family barbecue and having a video for the young people.

What you can do at the time

- Give her as much control as you can (within sensible limits) over what she wears and does, so she feels that she fits in with the group.
- Reassure her that she already knows how to make friends. She already knows how to be a good friend because of the friendships she has made in the past. Remind her that making friends takes time and not to rush it.
- Help her keep in touch with old friends.
- Be welcoming to her friends. It will help her to make friendships if you are welcoming; and if the young people come to your house, you will know where they are and what they are doing.
- Help her set up a homework routine that helps her to manage her home work and still have time for relaxation and friends.
- Be a good listener without asking too many questions. If you ask what they did today they are likely to say "Nothing". If you make a snack and sit down for a casual chat they are more likely to tell you.
- Remind her that it is normal to feel confused and unsure at first and that most others will be feeling the same way.

- Be a support but try not to give advice too quickly. Problems that young people can solve for themselves help to build confidence.
- Support her in joining in any school activities that she is interested in. This is a good way to make new friends.
- Make some allowance for tiredness and irritability in the early weeks.
- Remember that in spite of everything, and in spite of what they often say, young people still need your love and support. Parents are usually the best support that young people can have.
- Get to know the parents of her friends. It can be helpful to be able to car pool for sports and special events and you are less likely to get into the situation of 'well everyone else gets to do this.' It's also good for her to learn to socialize with other adults outside the family circle.