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Transition to Secondary School



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Transitions: Starting secondary school

This time is an important stepping stone for your young person and a normal stage on the road to adulthood. There will be tears along the way, but at this time, as always, they need your interest, reassurance and support.

Moving to 'big school' is a major transition in a young teenager's life. They will experience new challenges, different to those at primary school, including a new, often much bigger and noisier environment, larger classrooms – along with new rules and expectations, different teachers and a whole new peer group.

This takes place during the normal adolescent transition from a child to a young person, so there is a lot going on! Your young person may feel excited, scared, dazed and confused or all of them at the same time, and you are likely to be feeling all these things too. How you parent and communicate will also need to change.

Young adolescents need your support to maintain good physical and emotionally healthy routines and habits so you can all cope effectively with these changes. Keeping to a timetable of positive sleep, rest, quiet times, eating and just being together is really important.



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Understanding their development

Adolescence can be overwhelming. One minute they could be acting in a 'mature way', and the next they can become defensive, grumpy or bad tempered. This can be an overwhelming experience, especially as you may feel you've just figured out parenting. The transition from your children looking entirely to you for support and validation, and towards looking to others, like peers, can be a difficult one to manage. Just remember that it's an important step towards them becoming an adult.

Young people's developing brains and hormone surges (all unseen except in their behaviours), along with the more obvious physical changes typically start at about age 10-13. They may start to be more awkward and self-conscious, and become more concerned with how they look and what their peers think.

Remember: you went through the exact same thing once. It can be hard to recall exactly what it felt like, but if you look back at your own behaviour when you were their age, you'll often find it's not so different.

It's important to remember they are still kids in many ways, and the developmental process is not a straight line! Every child reacts differently, and these reactions can be very strong. In times of high stress it is normal, regardless of our age, to throw a tantrum like a toddler. Be prepared and respond in a calm, patient and understanding way to the young person in front of you on the day!



Who am I?

Identity is a key hallmark of this time: your young person starts to work out who they are, as well as what and how they think about themselves and the world. At this time, they'll start expressing opinions and seeing themselves more in the context of their peers and their wider world, not just their family and home life. This can be a hard transition to manage, but it's a rewarding one, and one that we all have to go through.

They can start to think and express themselves in ways that can be in absolutes or overly dramatic, e.g. "Mum, there is no way that is going to work." Alternatively, they might start to ask questions of you and the world around them, as they start to form and shape their identities. This can be confronting and challenging, but nearly always interesting.

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There are glimpses of changes in primary school, but changes now start to speed up. Being different and unique (just like their friends) becomes important. They will become interested in different ways of behaving, groups, friend, clothes, interests, and then quickly move onto the next thing.

The opinions of friends or peers – and acceptance among them – is often the primary reason for acting in (or out) certain ways, and with other distractions, it can take up a lot of their waking time. They may do a lot less around the house, be disinterested in what you say or what is going on at home. They also may seem sullen or disrespectful and need to be reminded of boundaries.

Be patient, ask them to do their share and let them know you understand there are new and exciting people in their lives, and things to do and see, but they need to still make time to be part of home life. This is hard work for parents but it is also exciting as you start to see them change. It is an early preview of the young adults they will become, so try to not take it personally. Your child isn't gone, they're simply changing in the ways we all change, and it will be the basis for a healthy adult relationship which will continue for the rest of your lives.





Staying connected

Even if your teenager doesn't seem to want to talk to you much, make the effort to remain connected. Show an interest in their school and extracurricular activities and encourage them to participate in other positive activities i.e. sports, music, theatre, technology or art. This is a good time to acknowledge the positive things they do and compliment them when they are helpful or do well.

They may need or ask for more privacy and may be less willing to talk about things with you. They may show an interest in keeping diaries and appear more secretive. They may also spend more time online – texting their friends for hours or playing online games.

Although most social media is now barred to users under 16, you may find they have found ways to bypass it.

This is when the 'generation gap' can start to show and can lead to misunderstandings and conflict. How much and when your child uses screen devices is something you need to talk about now, as their use will likely increase throughout secondary school.

It is a good idea to have their internet access in a shared, family space, rather in their room, so you can monitor how much time they are in front of screen, including phones and television. Be cautious with parental trackers or software which allow you to directly monitor the content they engage with. Young people can become hostile if they feel they are being spied on, and, even with good intentions, this practice can become controlling or abusive. One helpful tip is to use the internet with your child. If they come across something troubling or objectionable, ask them what they think of it, and why it might be bad. Use this opportunity to teach them skills which can protect them both now and later.

Discuss both the positives and negatives of technology use and how to keep 'cyber safe'. It is a good idea to make some tech-free time for everyone and eat dinner together as a family when possible.



Keep communication going

As children start to exhibit more typically adolescent behaviours, they may use the 'grunt and nod' method or just roll their eyes to your questions. This can be annoying, irritating and hurtful, but try to persist and talk to them as much as you can. It's easy to slip into lecture mode, but this usually just results in them switching off.

Keep your messages brief, offer nods and encouragement so that when they do talk to you, you can keep the communication ongoing.

At this time of 'super awkwardness', some young people don't like talking face-to-face, so walk next to them or do a task while you chat. Ask questions about school, not just homework. Remember there's lots of other aspects to the experience of school. Help them stay reasonably positive. If they say, "I hate my science teacher", you might reply, "What are they like?" Listen for a while and say something like, "Sounds like you are handling him really well, it's only 2 hours a week."

If they come home from school upset, this is a chance to strengthen your connection. Allow them some alone time, sit and listen to them, offer a reassuring pat on the back or a hug. Work with them on problem solving and handling some stresses well. At this time, and throughout adolescence, they need your presence and your help to solve problems or think about things differently or positively.

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Keep showing affection. Even if they reject your cuddles, you can still give them a pat on the back, tell them you love them or do something special for them. Spend time together, even if it is just playing computer games, watching movies or going shopping. It is sharing experiences that is important. Show them that you care about and respect their opinions (even if you don't agree with them).



It can be difficult. You might have become used to them being affectionate, or telling you just about everything. It might feel like you have less in common with your child, or like they're getting new hobbies or behaving differently. Just remember that you have one major thing in common. You grew up once, and that means you went through all of the things they're now going through. Remember your sudden awkwardness, your dislike of affection, and how you thought your parents were a bit uncool.

You came around and realised what your parents did for you. Your teenager will eventually do the same.

Encourage by reminding them of what they are good at. Respond to their negatives with positives.

Communication is two-way. They will listen more if they feel you listen to them. Don't interrupt or shout over them. Be patient, then have your say.

Be assertive when needed, without raising your voice, e.g. "No that doesn't work for us" or "I'm saying no to that, but let's look at other options".

Positive role modelling

Remember their feelings are real and need to be expressed, acknowledged and discussed, rather than hidden away or ignored. Be prepared to help them share their feelings, even if you are uncomfortable at times. As the adult and the parent, they take their cues from you.

Continue to check in with them and ask them, "How it is going?". Try not to judge, interrogate or lecture. Just support. Remember, starting school is a big change and it just takes a while to settle in. If you would like further information about how you can support your child at this time, contact us at enquiries@ds.org.au and we can connect you to the right support.

Parent survival tips

Change for them means changes for you – think about how this can be a positive time for all of you.

It's OK not to know everything. There is lots of information to support you; online or telephone help lines, as well as community health, school, parent and family support services. There is nothing wrong with asking for help. Self care is your absolute. Try to keep some time for yourself and your relationships to maintain your health and wellbeing. This will help your parenting and keeping a positive relationship with your child. When asking things of them, try to give reasons so they have a clear understanding of your expectations. You may experience a little pushback but try to remain firm and fair, with an extra dose of patience!

It is also a good time to maintain or make new connections with other parents. This is a great way to reassure yourself that everything's going to be OK. It also helps build your support network, particularly during tougher times.

Independence VS dependence

Recognise that these are still the early days of their adolescence, so although they may start to assert their independence, more than ever they need to know you are still there for them. It may feel like rejection and they can be very sensitive during this time of change with a lot of push and pull. You may feel as if they're pushing you away or excluding you from knowing what's going on. Do more of showing them how (not doing it all for them) to build their confidence and skills, as well as to recognise their 'young person' status.



It could be showing them practical skills, like making a simple dinner or washing their 'street' clothes on a Monday, or how to fix something or plan their homework diary for a week.

Doing things that model practice, discipline, focus, relaxation, negotiation, compromise and teamwork are all good lessons to start them on the way to adulthood, and keep you connected to them as you adapt and negotiate your relationship and boundaries with one another.

Encourage, listen and make suggestions but don't take over. Be a coach, as well as a parent. Support them from the sidelines.

When to step in:

- They ask and want you to
- You don't think they can handle it alone
- If they are withdrawn (staying alone in their room all their time and disinterested in their friends or school)

It can be hard to judge sometimes, so be open to feedback. But make sure to trust your judgement – sometimes, when young people are struggling they want to hide it instead of reaching out for help.

This may be the time to seek outside support (GP or the school is the best place to start).



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Different needs and additional support

The behaviours and the ups and downs during puberty and adolescence are absolutely normal, and most young people come through it successfully.

It is important to also remember that not all young people face this transition with the same emotional, material, developmental and cultural experiences. For many young people, they have to deal with not only this transition but other factors as well. Some face language, literacy, culture, faith, social disadvantage and additional learning, developmental, cognitive, physical and sensory needs which can make them feel like 'in-betweener teens'.

When they have to navigate cultures between school, community, home and family life, they may need support if they feel pulled between different worlds. It's important to recognise and understand this. Discuss it openly, including how you feel about the importance of maintaining links to your shared culture. This will help them develop great life-long coping and social skills, which all adults have to learn to operate and adapt out in the world. This can be hard, particularly as your own school and community life was and can be so different to your child's experiences. Schools should be happy to discuss these challenges, so ask to speak to a teacher or School Wellbeing officer, or seek support from your local community and family services.

If your young person requires additional support or has learning needs, plan ahead and make connections with school staff. Going to parent information sessions before and during the time your child is at school will help all of you.

If your young person seems very anxious or depressed, talk to them about their feelings and any impact on them going to school and connecting with friends.

It's okay to speak to your GP or a professional. about this. The earlier you seek help, the better it is for you and your children.

Where to access further help

QFamily www.qfamily.org.au

Family Relationships Advice Line
1800 050 321

Lifeline
13 11 14

Raising Children
www.raisingchildren.net.au

Kids Helpline
1800 55 1800
www.kidshelp.com.au



Drummond Street Services acknowledges the traditional owners of the land where we work and pay respects to elders past, present and future.