

TRANSITIONS

STARTING SECONDARY SCHOOL

“This is a big change for both of us. Let’s support one another and enjoy the ride!”

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 are acting in a 'mature way' and then revert to being defensive, grumpy or bad tempered.

Young people's developing brains and hormone surges (all unseen except in their behaviours), along with the more obvious physical changes that typically start usually earlier for girls at 10–11yrs and for boys 11–13yrs. They may start to be more awkward and self-conscious and become more concerned with how they look and what their peers think.

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, they start to work out who they are, what and how they think about themselves and the world, expressing opinions and seeing themselves more in the context of their peers and their wider world, not just their family and home life.

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 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.

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; different ways of behaving, groups, friend, clothes, interests and then quickly moving on to the next thing.

What friends or peers think or do and their acceptance 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, so 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.

They also may seem sullen or disrespectful and need to be reminded of boundaries. This is hard work for parents but it is also exciting as you start to see them change and it is an early preview to the young adults they will become, so try to not take it personally.

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, or show an interest in keeping diaries or blogs and appear more secretive, being on the internet or texting their friends for hours.

Although most social media (facebook, twitter and YouTube) have a minimum age of 13 yrs, your young person may be well ahead with their technology use, including smart phone and apps.

This is when the 'generation gap' can start to show and can lead to misunderstandings and conflict. Therefore, how much and when your child uses screen devices is something you need to talk about now as their use will only 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.

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.



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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 results in them just switching-off. Keep your messages brief, offer nods (without the grunts) and encouragement so 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 "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.

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 the sharing of experiences that is important. Show them that you care about and respect their opinions (even if you don't agree with them).

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".

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

It can be hard at times but try not to snap back, name call or yell. Remain in control of your own feelings. Walk away if you need to rather than responding in anger. If they have clearly done the wrong thing talk to them about taking responsibility, and what they have learned, stay future focused.

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 be the positive role-model.

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.



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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; on-line or internet, telephone help lines, 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 'push-back' 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-pull', 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 and recognise their 'young person' status.

It could be 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 team work 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.

Step in, (can be hard to judge sometimes) when: they ask and want you to, you don't think they can handle it alone or If they are withdrawn (staying alone in their room all their time and disinterested in their friends or school).

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

DIFFERENT NEEDS - ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

The paradox of same but different rings true, it is how we react to things that is different. The behaviours and the ups and downs during puberty and adolescence are absolutely normal, and most of them come through it successfully.

It is important to also remember that not all young people face this transition with the same emotional and material, developmental and cultural experiences. For many young people they have to deal with not only this transition as

well as other factors; language, literacy, culture, faith, social disadvantage and additional learning, developmental, cognitive, physical and sensory needs which can make them feel very much the 'in-betweeners 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. Recognising and understanding this, discussing it openly, including how you feel about the importance of maintaining links to yours and their culture, will help them develop great life-long coping and social skills, which all adults have to learn to operate and adapt to out in the world. This can be hard, particularly as our own school and community life was and can be so different to your child's own experiences. Schools are 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 its impact on them going to school and connect with friends.

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