

# Starting High School – Tips for Parents

Starting high school is significant step in every teen's life. It is also a time of mixed emotions – simultaneously excited and anxious; hopeful and fearful; confident and confused, for the student and the parents.

Parents want the best for their child and they want the move to high school to be successful. Parents have an important role in the transition, although their role is also changing as the expectations at high school are different and their child is becoming more independent. Parents want to make the best decisions and the child wants more control and independence.

These changes are the same for parents of children and youth with physical and other disabilities but there are many more things to consider. Your experience at elementary school has shown that mistakes can be made and the equipment you arranged for in June may not be available in September, or the teacher that seemed open and willing in the spring meeting is now harder to work with. And just as the school is new to your child, it is also new to you and you are not sure who to contact or who is responsible for special education programs and services.

## **The First Day**

You know the transition was well planned, with a team meeting of staff from both schools, and lots of visits to the high school by you and your child. But now it is the first day and you are not sure all the arrangements have been made and you are nervous that things will go wrong. As your child has special needs, you are especially worried about their health and safety at school.

The first thing to recognize is that things will go wrong and that high school staff have lots of experience of the challenges, and how to fix them. You also need to re-look at the transition plan developed in Grade 8 and prioritize your issues. The transition plan should have included a contact name at the high school and you may want to start by contacting that person, in the week before school starts. You need to know what the most important issues are in the plan. If your child needs health or personal supports, that may be the top priority. It may not matter that there is a mistake in the class schedule, but it does matter that your child needs help with feeding or toileting.

Busing can also be a source of stress and making contact with the school transportation provider to confirm the arrangements for day one will help. You can also have a back up plan, in case the bus doesn't show up or it arrives late, and for the return journey. You can empower your child by giving them a cell phone, a contact phone number or instruction on what to do if there is a mix up.

If you have covered the health and safety aspects the next concerns may be about accessibility, equipment and supports in the classroom. The school visits in the spring should have identified any accessibility issues and if they haven't been addressed, this may be your next priority. It would be ideal if the new computer is available and working on the first day, but it is not as critical. On the first day the school may have special assemblies or events to welcome new students and teachers are more likely to be talking about classroom procedures and the curriculum plan than actually teaching new subjects.

## **The First Week**

As you both settle into the new routine, you can start to learn more about the school and the teachers. Attend any Open Houses or Meet the Teacher nights. This gives you (and them)

an opportunity to put a face to the name, and to start to build a relationship. It is not the time to share all your questions and concerns, but rather to ask some general questions and find out about the teachers plans. It may also be a good time to request an individual meeting, or to find out how they would prefer to communicate with you.

The end of the first week may also be a good time to follow up with your designated contact at the high school. You can check in with them about arrangements that still need to be sorted out, or let them know that everything was in place. You can also find out if they will be your on-going contact or if a change is to be made.

For great ideas on preparing for a meeting with high school teachers, check the article [Parent-Teacher Interviews: Secondary School](#), on the Raising Children website.

### **The Individual Education Plan (IEP)**

During the first week, you or your child, should check with each teacher to make sure they have a copy of the IEP. If not, you could provide a copy or encourage the teacher to find a copy. Whether they have a copy or not it is important to highlight the most relevant elements. Letting the teacher know what accommodations are helpful, and what instructional or assessment strategies work best can be helpful.

The IEP must be reviewed within the first 30 days of the term or semester, and you could ask the classroom teacher, and/or your contact, about the process and how you will be involved. Some school boards use online systems and you may be able to access the current or draft IEP through the parent portal. As this is the first review at high school a meeting might be more effective and you can let the school staff that you would like to meet with them to discuss the IEP. If you are not available for meetings, let the staff know how else they can involve you in the process by phone or e-mail.

## **Supporting the Student**

One of the best ways you can support the transition to high school is by listening to your child and talking regularly about school. A non-verbal child may use their Augmentative or Alternative Communication (AAC) device to share with you, or you may pick up signs from their behaviour and attitudes. As a parent you may want to follow up and get issues addressed quickly, but you also need to respect the student and encourage their efforts to problem solve and be more independent.

The importance of listening can't be understated. Your child is growing up and starting to make their own decisions, and talking to you can be a great way to share their thoughts and test their ideas. Often they are not looking for solutions but sharing their feelings and perspectives. They may be looking to you for support, but they don't necessarily want you to solve their problems. Asking questions to help them describe the problem in more detail, or to identify possible solutions can be helpful. It is also important to acknowledge their feelings and let them know it is OK to be mad, or frustrated or disappointed.

## **Friendships**

Friends are important and having someone, or a group of friends, to share the experience of starting high school can be invaluable. Positive friendships are an important part of the journey to adulthood. They help teenagers learn important social and emotional skills, such as being sensitive to other people's thoughts, feelings and wellbeing.

Ideally, your teen has arrived at high school with a friend, or friends from elementary school. In the first days and weeks these friends will help your children find their way in the new environment and be available to share feelings and fears. Sometimes these friends drift away as they are in different

classes or programs; others will become closer with common classes and experiences.

If your child has trouble with finding and keeping friends, you may have to be more involved. Some children are quite happy with few or no friends and you may not need to do anything. If your child wants friends they may need help connecting with other teens, or help with being a friend. For strategies on helping your child, check the blog article, [How Parents can Help Children and Teens to Build Friendships](#).

### **Extra-Curricular Activities**

High schools offer a wide range of extra-curricular activities from a lunch time chess club to after school sports teams. Joining a club or team is a great way to make friends, build skills and become involved in the life of the high school. Typically there will be an event early in the school year to highlight the activities available at high school.

You can encourage your child to review the list of activities and select one or two they would like to join. They may follow their current interests or decide to try something new. Both options will provide a chance to meet new people and have new experiences. Positive experiences in extra curricular activities will help them feel more connected to their new school and develop a sense of belonging.

### **Moving Forward**

Over the next year you can support your child's success in a variety of ways. Attending school events and activities will help you to build relationships with school staff and become more comfortable in the new school. On-going communication with the classroom teachers will enable you to work collaboratively to solve problems and be involved with reviews of the IEP through the year. It will also help you to feel involved and connected to the school. Listening to you child will enable you to support their independence and provide a

safety net when needed.