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Going to  
High School

# FRESHMAN FOCUS

They may have ruled their middle school but now they're back to being newbies. With new scenes and routines, here's how you can help your child with the sometimes tricky transition into high school.

BY AMY MACLACHLAN

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**Do** you remember your first day of high school?

The day you went from being top of the totem pole to a “minor niner?” I do. It was a big, old building in Brampton, Ont., with 40-odd portables and two floors of hallways packed tight with the 2,000-plus students who went there. Finding homeroom was a tricky proposition, and navigating the completely foreign halls between periods was a stressful event. New teachers. New students. New freedom. Public transit to school and back home again. School uniforms. A huge cafeteria for lunch. Smokers on the sidewalk.

And me.

It was a challenging time for sure, and it’s no different for kids just starting high school now. Teens must shoulder more responsibility, manage their time more wisely, navigate increasingly complex social relationships, work harder and find their niche amidst a school that is larger and busier than the school they just left. But they’re not the only ones who experience change with the jump of a grade. Parents will, too, be faced with a transition of their own: raising high schoolers.

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Here’s how you can both navigate the new waters ahead.

### THE LEAP

“It’s a big jump,” says Karen Pozios, an Oakville, Ont.-based mom with a 17-year-old son and 12-year-old daughter. “Both in the maturity that’s asked of them—socially and intellectually—and just figuring out the structures and all that kind of stuff. There’s more of a sense of ‘you have to just get in there and figure it out.’”

What’s important to remember, says Pozios, is staying on top of things as they happen—especially academic problems. “It’s really fast-paced, especially in a semester system. If you wait, issues can snowball because it ticks along so quickly. So, if your kid is struggling, they shouldn’t hesitate to seek help.”

Having different teachers for every subject is also a change for most Grade 9 students. “Teachers have so many more students in high school, and so

many more demands on them. It’s hard for the kids and hard to have a parent-teacher relationship,” says Pozios.

### EASING GROWING PAINS

So how can you help your son or daughter transition more smoothly? Sara Dimerman, a psychologist, author and founder of [helpmesara.com](http://helpmesara.com), encourages parents to make contact with teachers, even if your child is doing well.

“In high school, teachers assume they can stand back; there’s no hand-holding. So unless your child is identified as having special needs, typically there’s no call home, and you’re not involved in any teacher-parent communication. But parents do still need to be actively involved; maybe even more so now.”

Dimerman recommends going to parent-teacher night “to meet the teachers and show your child that you’re very interested in what he or she is doing,” as ►



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well as attending parent council meetings where you can learn more about the school, meet other parents and maybe even administrators. Going to the orientation that happens before the school year begins is also a great way to meet school staff—particularly guidance counsellors.

“Keep an open relationship with the people who are going to help your child,” she says. “And encourage your child to get involved in after-school activities or sports; As a parent, you’ll get the opportunity to go and view what they’re doing or go and watch a game.”

Omari Rhoden is a teacher and department head in Brampton, Ont., who is also involved in a program called Link Crew, a special orientation event that helps teens make the leap into high school. He stresses that while it’s important for parents to stay involved, they should also give their children the freedom to grow.

“My advice to parents is to stay engaged but to also allow

their children to have a voice when it comes to the extra-curricular activities and classes they want to take part in,” he says.

In addition, Rhoden notes that while parents might have certain expectations about their children’s level of performance in school, those expectations shouldn’t trump their children’s passions.

“Have an open dialogue with your teen letting them have input on the decisions that are made,” says Rhoden. “This will help make the transition to high school smoother.”

### REWARDING EXPERIENCE

While high school brings many challenges, it’s important to remember that it can also be richly rewarding.

“Most high schools offer so many wonderful courses that allow teens to expand their horizons and learn more about themselves,” says Dimerman, noting that some of the social changes we often think of as negative (like integrating into a



whole new group of people, for example) can have a positive outcome.

“Yes, they’re going to be exposed to new things and may experiment; but you have hopefully established a strong foundation and open communication so that you can guide them towards making wise decisions. And even though increased independence might create challenges for parents, this is a healthy part of development that may boost self-confidence”.

Pozios agrees. “I think once they get a hang of the fact that it is on them, there is a maturity; that’s partly just growing older, but they also rise to meet the challenge.” ■

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## WAYS TO HELP YOUR TEEN TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL

### PREPARE

In the summer, if your child will be walking to school, map out the route they'll take and maybe even walk with them. If they'll be taking public transit, try that out, too. Visit the school; get a feel for where their classes might be, where the lockers are, how the cafeteria is laid out, etc. Talk to other parents who have been through it already. "Acknowledge your anxieties, for both teenagers and parents. It's normal," says Sara Dimerman.

### TIME MANAGEMENT

A part-time job, extra-curricular activities, homework, and a greater desire for time with friends means your teen has to learn how to manage her time. "If you find your child is not practicing good time management skills—things like list-making, keeping a diary or calendar, writing down homework—you can offer guidance, but don't impose your way. Instead, say something like, "Are you open to me sharing what has worked well for me?"

### COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Maintaining open communication and respecting your teen's concerns is important, according to Dimerman. Navigating tricky

situations (like, for example, when you want to personally meet with the guidance counselor but your teen says she'll be embarrassed if you do) calls for respecting both the needs and preferences of the child and your own concerns of what's best for your child. Open communication also encourages your teen in a way that he will be more inclined to come to you with problems. "Ask them for their opinions, for more information, etc. Be involved but also make your child feel that they're capable of handling their own concerns."

### SCHOOL RESOURCES AND ORIENTATIONS

Your child may feel overwhelmed and out of place in a huge school with few familiar faces. School-run orientations can be invaluable to help your teen start to feel at home. "They feel like they're at the bottom of the food chain. They're intimidated by a new, big place, there are hundreds if not thousands of kids they have no connection to," says Omari Rhoden. "More experienced students can help. They talk about how they handled it, and things they would have wanted to talk about given their experience." ■