

Easing the Transition to Secondary School

Selecting a school and helping your child adapt to the demands of secondary school can be challenging for both parents and children. However, there are many things parents and students can do to ease the transition and enjoy the opportunities this time brings

By Tena Panizza, School Psychologist



CAMBERWELL GIRLS GRAMMAR SCHOOL PROVIDES A CARING, FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT THAT HELPS EASE THE TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL.

In easing the transition to high school, the first challenge lies in selecting a suitable school for your child. This can be tricky because there are so many factors to consider for both students and parents. Students are sometimes swayed by where their friends are going, as the thought of going to a large place where they don't know anyone is understandably daunting. Parents are sometimes overly swayed by the reputation of the school. Don't let any one factor make or break your decision.

When selecting a school, look at the whole picture rather than narrowing in on one or two specific aspects (such as good reputation or close to home). The most important factor is that there is a good fit between your child's individual characteristics and the school environment. It is vital that the school not only offer your child academic opportunities, but that they feel they belong socially. Where this sense of belonging is lacking, students struggle to focus on the curriculum as they are preoccupied by their sense of isolation. When selecting a school, keep in mind the following:

- Does the curriculum offer opportunities in line with my child's interests and areas of skill?
- Does the school culture and population fit with my child? Will they belong?
- Does my child want to go to this school?

The Developmental Psychology of Adolescence

In essence, adolescence is marked by the exploration of the following three stages:

Early Adolescence:

Am I normal?

Middle Adolescence:

Who am I?

Late Adolescence:

What is my place in the world?

Keeping these stages in mind allows you to better understand and support your adolescent. For more information on these stages and general parenting advice, refer to *Adolescence: a Guide for Parents* by Michael Carr-Gregg.

Preparing your child for high school

The second issue lies in adapting to the transition from primary to secondary school.

In primary school

Most primary schools offer a transition program at the end of Year 6. Find out what

transition program is offered at your child's primary school. The program may cover topics such as what to do on the first day, how to make new friends, standing up for themselves, and how to get organised. Ensure your child attends any kind of orientation day offered by a secondary school.

Before secondary school starts

Prepare your child for secondary school by addressing the practical aspects first, as this will make the first day run smoothly. Be sure to get all books, medical forms, uniforms, and exercise gear early as being unprepared will add to your child's stress significantly. If your child has a learning disability, be sure to transfer their assessments to the secondary school as they may not necessarily be transferred. If your child will take public transportation, show your child the route to school on the tram, train or bus, before the first day of school. Allow them at least one opportunity to go on a practice trip alone in accordance with the school timetable.

Clothes

If you choose a school without a uniform, jointly decide on a clothing budget for each term or semester. Buy a few basic items and allot a discretionary budget that your child can spend on items they feel are important.



A GOOD WAY TO MAKE NEW FRIENDS IS TO JOIN GROUP ACTIVITIES.

Unless the items are offensive, don't balk at your child's taste. Clothes are a form of self-expression; if you reject your child's clothes, they will feel rejected.

Making new friends

In addition to the practical aspects of settling into school, your child will have to build a new group of friends. An effective way of making new friends is to join group activities such as debating and sports teams, or the student council. Encourage your child to try at least one of these options.

Developing good study skills

Developing good study skills involves setting goals, setting up a workspace and finding a study/life balance.

Reflect on goals

Before your child starts secondary school, have a frank discussion about what they want to achieve and how they can reach their goals. Encourage your student to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, then brainstorm how they will address these weaknesses. Students often spend too much energy on their strongest subject areas and avoid studying in the areas that frustrate them. By identifying their strengths and weaknesses, they will know how to invest their energy.

If your student appears to procrastinate when studying, find out why. Often procrastination is a way of avoiding a task that they are unsure about. Your student may need direction on how to go about starting

or completing an assignment. Explore this with your child and help them break more complex tasks into more achievable chunks. Where necessary, encourage them to ask for help from their teachers directly rather than calling them yourself (in a first instance).

Setting up a workspace

Help your student to set up a workspace. Ideally, it should be somewhere separate but not completely away from others, so that an adult can intermittently (and discreetly) supervise them. If this is not possible, suggest they leave the door open when studying or drop in with food and water briefly.

When setting up a work area, negotiate which distractions will be available to your student while they study (for example, mobile phones and music). If your child believes they can work with music on or with other distractions, trial it for a week to see if it works. You might be surprised. Regardless, make them accountable for their marks. Set this up early to avoid arguments.

Study/life balance

Help your student set up a timetable that includes time for work, socialising and spending time doing something they enjoy (watching TV etc). Have designated blocks for studying, socialising with friends (phone, email, text), and spending time with family (eating dinner together). If your child has a favourite TV show, build that into the study timetable as well.

Don't expect your child to spend all of their time studying. Instead, help your student find a balance between socialising

and studying. Above all, trust your child to make their own decisions and hold them accountable for their choices.

Help your student get organised

The research shows that organisation is a major issue in the transition to high school. Getting organised can be particularly challenging for Year 7 students because they have to move between classes every subject and remember the right books.

Some suggestions

- Develop a locker list itemising which book they need for each class.
- Show them how to use a diary. Perhaps show them yours or that of an older sibling or peer.
- Write their class timetable in their diary.
- Buy a luggage tag and write the books and equipment your student will need for each day. Attach this to their schoolbag as a reminder for what to bring to and from school.
- Place large labels with the subject title on notebooks for easy identification.
- Ensure they have a keychain that hooks onto their bag. This makes their keys easy to find and hard(er!) to lose.
- Ensure they have a memory stick that clips onto something (a keychain, spiral note book etc).

Managing conflict with your adolescent

With the transition to secondary school comes greater independence and a greater need for self-sufficiency. This can cause conflict between parents and children.

If you find yourself embroiled in conflict with your child, address these issues sooner rather than later as it is unlikely to simply go away. First, take a step back and make a list of what frustrates you. Then reflect on these annoyances and cross out the low-priority ones. Review your list and choose one issue to address with your child. Put the rest (their messy room, dishevelled hair etc) on the backburner for now.

When the time comes to address the issue with your child, be prepared to negotiate and compromise. This will encourage cooperation and keep rebellion at bay. If you want your child's room to be

clean and they prefer it to look like a tip, find some middle ground. For example, ask that they clean it on Sunday before dinner (then let it go for the rest of the week). Try to get them to come up with a solution as they are more likely to follow through on something that is their idea.

If they don't follow through on their promise, employ a logical consequence such as banning something they value until they resolve the issue. Be calm, fair and reasonable when punishing your child for a wrongdoing. Avoid lengthy discussions as they'll tune out or worse, give you lengthy excuses. Instead, employ logical consequences. For example, if your child is half an hour late home, ensure they come home half an hour early next time. These sorts of logical consequences mean a lot more to children than do a 'talking to'. Actions (reasonable ones) speak much louder than words.

If your child is particularly rebellious or thinks the consequences are unfair, give them a choice between two reasonable options. For example: "You didn't keep your word about cleaning your room before dinner on Sunday so you can clean your room and do the family dishes two nights in a row" or "You can clean your room and give up the computer for a night". Giving them choices affords them a sense of control, which will make it less likely that they will rebel.

Getting your adolescent to open up

Even when relationships between parents and children aren't in conflict, parents often report that it is difficult to get their children to open up. Chances are if you ask your adolescent how their first day at school was, they will likely respond by saying "fine" or "good".

A student's guide to making new friends

Starting a new school can be daunting. Secondary schools are generally larger than primary schools and at least at the beginning you may not have close friends. Remember, you're all in the same boat. Everyone is starting school and out of their comfort level. However, here are a few things to help you make friends more quickly.



CAREY GRAMMAR STUDENTS ENJOY A GOOD STUDY/LIFE BALANCE.

Instead, ask them what surprised them, how was it different to primary school, and if they saw any interesting extra-curricular activities. Don't ask if they've made any friends as this will put pressure on them; instead, ask if they met any interesting students. This might also be a good time to share your own experience of the first day of secondary school.

If talking to your child directly doesn't work, do something enjoyable with them one-on-one such as cooking, going out for coffee or walking. Some parents go for a drive, let their children choose the music and just enjoy the time together. You may find that the lack of eye contact may make them more likely to open up.

When you can't get them out of the house because they are chained to their computer or the TV, join them. Ask them to show you how to use Myspace or watch their favorite TV show with them. It demonstrates to your child that you are interested in them, which makes them more likely to open up.

Make eye contact and smile. We naturally gravitate towards others in the environment who are happy and confident. Be sure to smile at others even if you feel nervous.

Break the ice. Comment on something around you such as the classroom, teacher, how hot the day is. Any comment will help get conversation started.

Show interest in others. Ask people questions about themselves such as what school they went to previously, and where they live. Ask what their teachers are like.

Find common ground. Point out anything you have in common: "You live in Carlton — I love going to Lygon Street to eat."

If your child approaches you with a problem, be sure to listen more than talk as this is the first step to showing you understand them. Resist the temptation to jump in and solve their problems — it may shut down communication or make them feel as if you don't trust their judgment. Instead, ask them how they might manage the problem. Be sure to acknowledge their proposed solution or at least good intentions. If you disagree with their solution, ask, "how will others react to that?" or "what might happen if you try that option?".

Secondary school brings a range of challenges, from getting organised to finding study/life balance to getting your child to open up. However, it is also filled with exciting opportunities and greater independence.

See www.cyh.com.au for more information on starting secondary school.

Tena Panizza is a school psychologist. She runs student and parent workshops on adolescent coping and conflict resolution.

Get involved. Start a sport or join the debating team, drama etc. Getting involved is an easy way to make friends because you'll have a common interest.

Give it time. If you're stressed out because you haven't made friends as easily as you wanted, remember that good friendships are developed over time.

Ask for help. If you've tried all the strategies above or you're being picked on, talk to someone about it. A teacher or the school counsellor can give you some other ideas.

Check out www.reachout.com.au for some more great ideas.