



Understanding key transition points during childhood and adolescence

A guide for parents

One of the most exciting aspects of parenting is watching your child grow and change. From the first weeks of life, children begin a journey, one that is marked by all kinds of milestones – baby’s first smile, sitting unaided, first words, first steps and the list goes on.

The transition in the short space of months from a tiny creature who seems to do nothing but sleep and feed to one with a distinct personality and multiple abilities is truly amazing. Exciting moments are celebrated with photos and videos and shared with family and friends in an instant via social media.

If parents were asked to nominate key transition points in their child’s life they might come up with a list similar to the following.

Key milestones

- Walking
- Talking
- Going to pre-school
- First day at primary school
- Moving to secondary school
- Starting Year 11 and 12
- Leaving secondary school

Of course, there would be other significant transition points unique to each child and family, such as the birth of a sibling, moving overseas, a traumatic event, sporting success and promotions.

However, research tells us that the transition points relating to a child's education are some of the most important stages in life and can have far-reaching impacts on their wellbeing and success both in learning and in their later life.

Parents want their children to be happy and successful. The good news is that parents play a huge role in helping their children to navigate the many transition points during their education journeys. Parents are a fundamental source of support for children, most especially at these times.

Why are transition periods so important?

Successful transitions can increase positive social, emotional and academic outcomes for children and young people. We also know that starting school and moving to secondary school are two major transitions that often involve challenges and potential stress for children and families.

Transition periods

During these times children must learn to:

- adjust to a new environment
- understand new rules and expectations
- interact with a new set of peers.
- negotiate ways to navigate the daily challenges and demands of school life.

If children and young people experience increased anxiety, stress or apprehension in the face of these major changes in their lives, how can parents support them to make these transitions as positive and successful as possible?

Let's look more closely at two major school transitions – starting school for the first time, and moving from primary to secondary school.

Starting school

We know that a successful transition to primary school happens when children feel a sense of belonging to the school and are involved both academically and behaviourally.

Parents have an important role to play in preparing children to make this big step in their lives.

“ To be honest, I think I’m more anxious about my child starting school than he is ... will he fit in? Will he make friends?
I’m not sure how he’ll cope with all the rules and routines and it’s a big school ... will he just get lost in the crowd?
– Parent

What do children about to start school worry about?

Young children experience a range of emotions about starting primary school. Many young children will worry about:

- losing their friends
- being away from their parents for a full school day
- making new friends
- the school routine and rules
- the physical environment including toilets and playgrounds.

What can parents do?

You know your children better than anyone else and will quickly notice how they’re managing the transition to school. There are ways you can support your child to make a positive and successful transition to primary school.

Tips for parents

- Ease your child's worries by creating a list of things to do in preparation for school such as buying a backpack, a visit to the new classroom, perhaps a playdate with new friends.
- Be calm and have a routine that helps start each day smoothly.
- Be positive! Your child will pick up on your emotions and attitudes very swiftly so you may need to harness your own fears or anxieties and focus on the good things that your child will experience.
- Be observant, as your child might not verbalise any fears or worries.
- Be understanding if your child seems to have changed in the first weeks of school – some become argumentative or withdrawn. Encourage them to talk about their day.
- Give positive praise when your child shows coping skills.
- Get involved in your child's learning – reading is a great way to build your child's

Moving from primary to secondary school

Research from the World Bank Development report reveals that the move into secondary school is considered one of the five most important transitions for young people. It's an exciting and sometimes scary time for adolescents, and coincides with significant physical, cognitive, emotional, psychosocial developmental changes. Most teenagers can't wait to move from the security and familiarity of their primary schools to a new and challenging environment with many more educational offerings and social opportunities. Transition to secondary school is challenging and can affect a young person's social, emotional and academic outcomes both while at school and beyond.

What do young people going into secondary school worry about?

Starting secondary school raises all kinds of concerns for young people including:

- being bullied
- losing old friends
- making new friends
- not finding their way around school campus
- rules and discipline
- getting on with their teachers
- homework and academic expectations
- older kids.



What can parents do?

Sometimes parents feel that they have little influence in the lives of their teenagers, but research has shown that support from peers, teachers and parents is critical in shaping the experiences and outcomes of young people during this often turbulent time.

“ I’ve given up on helping with homework – Maths is beyond me!
But we make time to do things as a family and there’s no better way to find out what’s going on with our new high-schooler!

Just as teenagers feel that secondary schools are large and impersonal environments, parents can also sometimes feel isolated and uncomfortable, reluctant to be involved with the school. This can lead to worries about the safety and wellbeing of their recently enrolled secondary-schooler.

It’s essential that parents and schools work together to develop a shared understanding of wellbeing and ways to address key concerns such as bullying and harassment. The most important element in adjusting to secondary school is a young person’s sense of belonging and their social and emotional health – their wellbeing.

Supporting your teen

Try these tips for supporting your teen’s successful transition to secondary school.

- Prepare your teen for what to expect at secondary school – organise school visits, uniform and books, and meeting new classmates before school begins
- Be open about your feelings and concerns and encourage your teen to share theirs.
- Talk to other parents in the same situation.
- Your teen may not be as communicative as usual but be open to a chat when they need it.
- Encourage new school friends to visit at home.
- Make connections with teachers and engage in school events and activities.

More information

Learn more about wellbeing and safety in the [Australian Student Wellbeing Framework](#), a guide for school communities.