

Starting High School

Starting high school is often a strange and stressful time for new Yr 7 students. Although they had previously visited the high school, heard the positive stories (and some negative) and feel ready to move on, there is still a certain inclination to stay put in the safety of primary school.

High school is the onset of change for children who are rapidly turning into adolescents. Beside the physical transformations, which are probably becoming apparent to them, there is also often a change in the way in which they view themselves. Other people are probably noticing the changes too, "...how quickly you're growing up", and, 'responsibility' seems to become a catch word with parents – suddenly, more is expected from them.

From the safety of the primary school classroom, with the same teacher and the same people, to the mayhem of different subjects every 40 minutes or hour, trying to find where the gymnasium is in relation to the science lab and attempting to wrestle your way through crowds of tall teenagers in the corridors. Then there are the logistics of getting from one end of the school to the other in two minutes. When you finally beat the odds and get to class on time, you have to rummage through your 10kg bag to find the appropriate book for that particular class, a nightmare if you haven't got a locker. Somehow, these resilient youngsters take it in their stride and manage to cope - some more easily than others.

To facilitate the process, high schools have a number of plans in place: tutor groups and teachers, peer groups, maps, meetings and support networks. Some schools strongly encourage parents to meet or contact their child's Tutor teacher early in the year, either by phone or email. Tutor teachers are an important link between the school and home. Tutor teachers, generally, have daily contact with the students within their group and are the first port of call should a problem arise – a comforting thought for many parents.

When the student finally has his or her schedule worked out and feels reasonably capable of orientating themselves around the school, other issues start arising such as friends and relationships. In primary school, students usually have a group of friends with whom they play – this group may change occasionally but it is generally stable. When a student goes to high school, their group formation often changes. Like feeling the need to move on from primary school, many students feel they need to move on from their friends – not that they don't like them anymore but rather they need some different type of stimulation. This can be a particularly unsettling time for students as they re-establish their social network – parents need to be aware of this, likening it to starting a new job, students need to feel their way around a bit before settling in with any particular group or person.

Another issue which needs addressing is homework. Whether a student likes it or not, they will be expected to complete homework in a number of subjects. It would be helpful for students if parents could support them by allocating a space, a time and materials to facilitate the process. Moral support is also important, encouraging words and a snack before starting can often be beneficial.

Other issues which will need addressing in the near future are food and money. In

primary school, students are generally quite content with a couple of dollars a week in pocket money and a weekly lunch order. In high school things are different. School canteens are much bigger than the primary version with a larger variety of goods on offer. Suddenly, the parent has much less of control of the eating choices their off-spring makes and what they use their money on. Many students may request increases in allowances, something that parents will need to consider – perhaps they could throw around that ‘responsibility’ word a bit?

There are many other issues that parents will need to help their child address such as: personal hygiene and the regular use of deodorants; menstruation and how it will affect the student both physically and within the school environment (especially during sport and gym); and the effect hormones will have (ie: acne, voice changes and growth spurts).

Finally, it is important to remember that children will always be children (no matter how old). A teenager is just a toddler with a few more layers of experience, if you took off the layers you would still have a toddler. Be sensitive to your adolescent’s new experiences and be loving and supportive of any changes or crises they may be going through – be their rock, be their strength, be their friend.

Susanne Witt