

Entering High School: Five Simple Ways To Help Your Teen Succeed

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High school is an exciting time that presents challenges for teens and parents alike. Your teen is entering a completely new environment replete with new academic and social pressures that are magnified by the raging hormones and crippling self-consciousness characteristics of the adolescent years.

High schoolers face academic challenges unlike those to which they have previously been exposed (for example, consider the pressure of final exams, honors courses, and college applications). Additionally, the social pressures teens face in high school involve higher stakes than those of past years – from the peer pressure to drink, or use drugs, be promiscuous, or the cliques and bullying that are rampant during this time in life. On top of that, there is the overall stress that comes with attempting to balance academics, extracurriculars, a social life, and life at home.

As the parent of a teen, you are in the unique position to help your youngster transition into high school and be better prepared for the challenges that he/she will face. Helping your teen prepare for high school also helps you, as the smoother your child's high school experience, the less stress and angst they will bring home.

With some preparation – such as the strategies below – and continuous investment in your relationship with your teen, the challenges of the high school years can become an opportunity for tremendous growth and maturation.

So what can you do to help as your child prepares to enter high school? Here are five areas to invest your efforts into that will provide a big payoff.

ONE: Attend orientation night with your teen.

Yes, we'll start with the simplest and easiest thing you can do - but gets overlooked by some busy parents.

Most high schools offer some sort of orientation night for incoming freshman or new students transferring in to the school. Be warned that your teen may dread this event – after all, attending orientation might mean they have to interact with strangers, admit that they are entering a new and vulnerable situation, and (worst of all) be witnessed in public in the company of their parent (that would be you – don't be offended, this is only the first of many times that your mere presence will be found mortifying to your teen).

In spite of this, it is worth it for both of you to attend the event, as it will allow your child to meet teachers and fellow students, learn about the campus and the class schedules, and feel more prepared on their first day of school.

TWO: Take your teen on a tour of the school.

The high school may offer a tour as part of orientation, but if not, the administration should be happy to find someone who can give you and your student a tour of the campus upon request. If that's not feasible, you can always stop by the campus with your student and locate the major buildings (gymnasium, science labs, cafeteria, main office, etc.). The first day of school can be disorienting, but that can be minimized a bit if your child already has an idea of where his/her classrooms are located. That stability will help your student's high school experience get off to a good start.

THREE: Get your teen involved in at least one club or sport.

The main benefit of engaging in extracurriculars is that it allows the teen an immediate way to make friends and develop a sense of community and belonging. Within the right group, having this sense of community and acceptance can act as a protective barrier to peer pressure from outside of that group. Additionally, it will provide challenges for your student and allow him/her to develop skills that might otherwise go untapped.

It's important to get your teen involved in a club/sport that will be a good fit for their talents and personality. For example, your high-energy and sports-loving student might do better on the basketball team than in the theatre club, but a student who is not athletic but very analytical will likely do better in the chess club than on the wrestling team.

FOUR: Talk to your teen about peer pressure.

This is something that should not be a “one and done” talk, but an ongoing, open discussion that is revisited often throughout the high school years. Discuss some of the pressures your teen may face and have them consider how they would respond. It is best to use specific examples (such as being pressured to take drugs, or to skip class, or bully other students/stay silent when witnessing bullying, etc.). Then work with your child to think of effective ways to respond. Mentioning the peer pressure you faced as a teen may help your child see you as someone who knows what he or she is talking about.

If your child is willing, have him/her role-play appropriate responses to various forms of peer pressure. It is one thing to talk through how to respond, but another thing entirely to put a response into action. Practice helps. Many teens will be embarrassed at the idea of role modeling with their mother or father. On the other hand, once you get them started they are likely to be hugely amused by watching their parent pretend to be another teen who is peer pressuring them to make negative choices. A true bonding moment!

FIVE: Open up a discussion about social media, comparison, and self-esteem. Teens are using social media more than ever before, and coupled with the insecurities that plague the teen years, the challenge to compare oneself with peers can be overwhelming.

The average American teen spends hours each day on various social media platforms, seeing images and posts that portray their peers as constantly happy, successful, popular, social, and attractive. What they likely don't realize is that social media is a highlight reel, where people are putting out only the best and most picture-perfect parts of their lives. Talking with teens about the difference between reality, and what is portrayed on social media, can help inoculate them against the pressure to base their self-esteem off of comparisons with others.

Just as it was the case when talking to your teen about peer pressure, discussing comparison and social media should be an ongoing and open conversation. The message you want to drive home each time is that their worth and identity do not come from how they are perceived by others, and that it is unwise to compare yourself to anyone else's carefully-curated (and highly unrealistic) highlight reel.

Although high school is a time with unique and painful challenges for students and parents alike, it is also ripe with opportunity for healthy growth and development from child to adult. The teen who successfully navigates the high school years is well-prepared to enter young adulthood. By following the above recommendations, your teen is much more likely to be able to meet and overcome the challenges of high school in a way that allows those experiences to shape them into a healthy and well-adjusted young adult.