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## **Counsellors' Corner**

### **Preparing Your Child/Student for the Transition to Middle School or High School**

#### **Rationale:**

Change can evoke many emotions in our youth and their families. The transition to middle and high school brings forth a variety of emotions (excitement, worry, anticipation, uncertainty) and responses from the youth as well as caregivers. In this newsletter, we would like to share perspectives on what is happening for our youth as well as specific strategies and guidance as we navigate this time of learning and growth.

#### **What's Happening for the Student:**

- Uncertainty, doubt, worry, and excitement tend to be common emotions during this time.
- Increased desire for independence; rejecting parental closeness in favour of peer-orientation.
- Moodiness; taking out worries & stressors on those that are close and forgiving
- Desire to sleep more; later going to bed and hard to wake up.
- Increased amount of time on social media
- Concerns re: getting lost (physically & emotionally), figuring out their lockers, not being able to keep up academically, losing the support network from elementary school, not "fitting in," and more tend to be the common worries.
- Excitement over a "fresh start," meeting new friends & teachers who don't know about prior mistakes and blunders, anticipating the idea of more freedom and choices, all can counter-balance some of the worries of entering middle/high school.

#### **Strategies For Parents**

- Stay connected.
- Prioritize your relationship and communication.
- Attend your new school's orientation night with your child.
- After school, ask specific questions; instead of, "How was school today," ask, "What is something that made you feel safe at school today? What is something your math teacher did that made you feel this year might be good? Who did you see that might be an interesting person to get to know?"

- Consider reading Gordon Neufeld's book, Hold On To Your Kids. Neufeld discusses the importance of keeping our kids *adult-oriented* in an age when their desire is to be *peer-oriented*. Teens tend to go to their peers for advice, problem solving, and guidance. While we accept this is a time of increasing independence, it is important that teens maintain a strong connection to adults as their mentors during this time.
- Allow your teen to have some say in rules regarding bedtime, phone use, curfew, etc. We love the saying, "Convince me!" Let your child convince you why their wishes are a good idea and how they will prove to you they are responsible enough to handle the extra freedoms they are requesting. This is preferable to you trying to defend your limits by telling them why they are *not* ready for extra freedoms. If you don't believe they are ready for what they are asking for, tell them what you need to see in their behaviour, work habits, etc. for you to consider their requests.
- Go for a drive with your pre-teen/teen in the front passenger seat. Sit on the beach together looking out at the water. Teens tend to open up more about their world when they don't have to make direct eye-contact.
- Try to not personalize negative comments – see if you can connect with the feeling underneath what is going on. (e.g., "Mom, you are so annoying when you tell me what to do all the time," your response could be, "It seems you are frustrated and want more independence." The goal is to help our teens feel heard so that they continue to open up to the adults in their world.
- If your child has any specific learning or mental health needs, communicate with the school, advocate for your child's needs.

### **Strategies For Student**

- Although annoying to break comfortable habits, try to get sleep, eat well, exercise and minimize your phone use 😊 – we believe in you!!
- It's helpful to remind yourself, "Millions of students before you have lived through this transition successfully, you will too!"
- If new bathroom signs confuse you (some are gender neutral and are used by all students), just hang back casually and watch what the other kids do.
- Find your "safe adults"; those who will hear you and help you.
- Say what you need. If you are worried about getting lost, ask your counsellor to set up a time after classes where you can walk through the school and figure things out. When all else fails, find an exit door, get your bearings, and re-enter.
- If you are looking forward to a "fresh start," now is not the time to re-invent yourself. Trying to recreate the front cover of Teen Vogue on day one of school will likely have you standing out and getting attention you don't want. Ease in, be an observer, watch for who looks like someone you may want to

be friends with. As you feel more comfortable with your surroundings, you can stretch your style into something more individual that represents you!

- Get to know your teachers. If you don't understand something and are nervous to ask in front of the class, email your teacher and ask for clarification. Feel confident in saying who you are in the email, i.e., "I don't like being called on in class, it makes me feel really stressed and my brain freezes." When you walk out of class, offer a quick, "Thanks," to your teacher, EA, or anyone else who might have been helpful.
- When you sit in a new class, consider not sitting at the back or the front; rather, somewhere on the side half-way up. When someone sits next to you, offer a smile. This person could end up being your best supporter in school.
- Try to get to class a bit early so that you have more of a choice of where to sit and don't have the last-minute anxiety of walking into class after the teacher started.
- If you are late, recognize that teachers understand it is your first year and many kids get lost or need extra time with their lock on their locker. Teachers will be **very** understanding during that first week of school.

### **Strategies For Teacher**

- Connect. Learn names. Help students to know they are safe and welcome in your class.
- Recognize that not every student or parent has had positive experiences with school. Make it your mission to change that. Reach out to parents.
- Check in with your students and ask open-ended questions (e.g. instead of, "Are you doing okay?" ask, "What has been the trickiest part of coming to high school?")
- Communicate! Let your students know that parents are part of their team and we are all working towards safety, support and success.

Remember that behaviour is communication. Consider the feelings behind refusal, escape, confrontation, disrespect. Often, uncertainty, fear of failure, and self-esteem are behind such behaviours. Connection and listening, as well as a discussion with parents, can often help you bridge the gap.

### **Practical suggestions...**

<b>Instead of saying...</b>	<b>Try....</b>
Don't be nervous, there's no need to worry.	I think most people worry when they try something new. We'll take it slow and figure it out as we go.

<p>If you have a hard time, I will come get you early, just have the school call me.</p>	<p>I trust that you will be okay because these teachers really care about you. I will see you at the end of day and we can talk about how it went.</p>
<p>Let's just sit in the car and wait until you feel ready to go in.</p>	<p>Have a routine and stick to it. Drive to school, say your goodbyes and have your child leave the car. There is safety and confidence in the predictable. <b>If your child is showing increased signs of anxiety, consult your school counsellor.</b></p>
<p>If you have any glitches, text me and I'll help you.</p>	<p>If things feel uncomfortable, slow down, take a breath, and look around you. Are there clues for how to find your way/what you should be doing/where you should be going? Can you check in with a friend or staff member? When is it appropriate to reach out to me? (emergency only – remember that we are trying to build some independence and resilience).</p>
<p>Assuming your pre-teen/teen is fine</p>	<p>Ask specific questions. Tell stories about your stress about high school or a new job and how you overcame that. Model confidence in your child's ability to settle in quickly. Avoid "helicopter" parenting and encourage your child to make connections with trusted adults in the building.</p>
<p>Thinking you are on your own as a parent in this</p>	<p>Reach out and ask for help! Counsellors make themselves available for support and your child's teachers want to know when there is a struggle so we can be supportive and proactive.</p>



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