

Our Favourite Ways to Help Your Child's Transition from Primary to Secondary School



Going from primary school to secondary school is a time of mixed emotions for parents and their children. However, there are ways you can help make the transition process easier

Transitioning from Primary to Secondary school is a time of excitement and anxiety for both children and parents. New surroundings, new friends, new challenges, and new choices are all on offer as your child opens the door on the first days of school.

So, how can you help prepare them for the first day - and the years to follow - and make the transition easier for both of you?

Five key elements of a positive transition

Research by students at Oxford University found that there were five key elements - in the eyes of a child - which constitute a positive transition:

1. They are able to **develop** new friendships, and **improve** their self-esteem and confidence
2. They **settle in** to school life in a way that causes no concerns to their parents
3. They show an **increased interest** in school and school work
4. They get used to their **new routines** and school organisation with great ease
5. They experience curriculum **continuity**.

These may sound pretty basic, but there isn't a simple, 'one size fits all' way to transition into a new environment. Every child is different: academically, emotionally and socially.

Helping the transition from Primary to Secondary school

We asked educators and parents who have experienced the transition for their advice on how to talk to their children, what support to offer, and which networks to put into place to make the transition run as smoothly as possible.

Visit the school in advance

As a parent, it's up to you to insist that you both attend orientation events. Even just visiting the school and getting a good idea of the lay of the land can help put your child at ease on the first day.

Children who are anxious about moving to a new school may not be the first to say they want to visit, so it can help if you are the one to suggest and organise it. Attending **open days** or an **orientation evening** for all your child's possible options will help both of you come to grips with what is expected in the next year.

Parent perspective

"If your child's secondary school offers a taster day or an orientation session, make it a priority to attend! Not only will you be provided with information about the school and how

things operate, you and your child will have a chance to meet new families that are also starting at the school."

"Find out what your child's primary school does to bridge the gap to the secondary school; what information do the schools exchange. This will help you understand what foundation has been laid before your child arrives at the new school."

"Friends of mine used to say their kids were going to 'big school'; however, we avoided that expression as it made the children feel that they were still small and weak and unprepared! Calling it Secondary School took away a lot of those preconceptions."

Maintaining friendships and making new friends

Your child may have gone through primary school with the same group of children, which is brilliant as they will have built up many friendships. However, the idea of making new friends can be daunting. Your child might be lucky enough to have their classmates join them at Secondary school, but in most cases they will only know a handful of children at most.

You can help prepare your child for this in a few ways. Get them involved in community activities or holiday clubs where they will make new friends before the school year starts - even if these children will not attend their secondary school, it's a good practice run!

You can also try to find out who in your local area will be attending the same school and introducing yourselves beforehand. Open days and orientation evenings are also a great chance to meet other parents and children who will be in the same situation as you.

Once at school, joining **extracurricular sports or clubs** is another way for your child to make friends with people who have similar interests. Just make sure that adding an extra activity doesn't impact negatively on their homework.

Parent perspective

"My children were mainly concerned about friendships. For my son it was easier - once he made friends, they were his mates for life. However, my daughter's circle of friends changed regularly during the first few years of Secondary. Helping her understand that this was normal was not easy. We discussed a lot about how our preferences change as we mature and that everyone matures at a different stage. There were still tears and moments where she felt abandoned by her peers, but once the dust settled she found friends she was better suited to, and they are still friends as they embark on their university experiences. If you've ever been or had a teenage girl, you understand just how volatile friendships can be."

Schedules and independence

At Primary school, schedules are usually dictated to your child by a teacher or by yourself, but when they move to Secondary school, schedules will vary from day to day. They will have classes with different children and teachers, and they will need to be responsible for their own homework schedule.

We suggest that, in the year leading up to the transition, you offer your child more opportunities to vary their schedules and be in control of planning. It will give you a chance

to step back and see how well they manage while you are still able to help in a more hands-on way.

During the summer before your child enters the secondary system, prepare yourself - and them - by encouraging a more independent way of living. Explain that life will be quite different and prepare them for that.

Parent perspective

"Secondary schools deliberately promote independence, but it is often difficult for you and your child to adapt. Some primary schools are great at encouraging a more independent approach during Year 6 but even with that, the leap when they start secondary is huge. They have to read a timetable, make sure they have the correct books and equipment for each day and then find their way around a much larger school with a heap of bigger bodies around jostling and intimidating them."

Homework and time management

As mentioned above, your child will have to learn to manage their own time and homework schedule. Assignments are no longer issued one day and due the next. They will have varying deadlines, and teachers in different disciplines will not necessarily think about homework in other subjects when they assign their own.

If your child is struggling to cope, see if you can help them put together a study rota. If the tasks become too much altogether, see if there is someone at the school you can speak to for advice. You may find that time management is the root of the issue, or it might be that there is too much being assigned.

It's important for your child to understand that homework levels will increase at secondary school, so there may be less time for social activities - such as having friends around, watching TV, or extra-curricular activities. We suggest keeping the extras to a minimum for the first part of the year until your child adjusts, and then adding activities until you find the right balance.

When it comes to homework, try to set aside an area at home where they can focus and concentrate. If you are all in the kitchen preparing dinner, your child may end up distracted. Every child has a different attention span, so make sure you find a solution that suits them.

Remember this is their homework, not yours! Be available to talk it through and praise them when they've done a good job. Don't be afraid to question them, but also learn to let them respond. Most children don't want to fail so it only takes a few assignments with bad grades to change how willing they are to answer your questions.

Parent perspective

"Accept that this is a new stage in their life and, instead of stressing about the changes for you, help them to start organising themselves so that the new term will be less of a shock. Give them more responsibility at home so that school will become an extension of that, rather than something alien."

Setting boundaries

With Secondary school comes more responsibility and, in many cases, greater independence. Your child may walk to school alone, or want to meet their new friends for parties. Rather than waiting for a row to happen, why not sit down with your child and decide on the ground rules; think curfews, parties, and dating... It's worth asking their opinion first, as they might already have very realistic expectations. If you have wildly different views, it's better to get them out in the open and discuss them, rather than slamming doors and stomping feet on the night of a big social event!

As a parent, you have to remember that your child is growing up and they aren't the same little baby they used to be. You need to be able to give them space to spread their wings whilst also keeping them safe. Before you sit down to discuss, think about what you and your partner expect and where you might be willing to compromise - it will make it easier when you are sitting around the table with your child.

Letting them speak first will also give them a sense that you are willing to listen to what they have to say; it's also key that when you disagree you have reason to back up why you believe you are acting in their best interest. Model good, positive problem solving; confrontation often results in stalemate.

Parent perspective

"One of the biggest shocks for a parent when their child transitions from Primary to Secondary school is the culture change. You go from being in the playground and in touch with the teachers, other parents and generally being close to the school at primary to dropping them off or having them make their own way into secondary school. You are no longer around to see who their friends are or how they behave!"

"Share your own experiences of Secondary school with your child; my daughter has always seen me as an adult, and to hear of me in a slightly vulnerable context made her feel better. Knowing that it wasn't always easy, but that I came through alive at the other end was good for her!"

Mobile phones

Mobile phones probably weren't around when you were a child at Secondary school (how old does that make you feel?), but there are benefits to your child having one; just make sure you know the school rules about mobiles as each school has their own policy.

Set the ground rules for usage and who is paying the bill so that you don't get any nasty surprises, but also let your child know that in an emergency you'll always be at the other end of the line. For the first few days make sure you are available if they call, and send them an encouraging text or two. Don't bombard them with messages or call them - they should be in class - but be supportive and remind them you're there if they need you.

Remind your child that a phone should not be used in lessons, and that they should keep it in their bag when they are taking public transport. Remember, you want them to feel safe - not afraid - so limit the horror stories, but make sure you're sending off a street smart student!

Parent perspective

"Be patient with your child and yourself - this is a big time of change and together you can navigate your way through it."

"If they are going to be walking to school alone and they haven't done that before, get them walking places alone during the holiday."

Information and communication

Get to grips with the curriculum as much as you can. We know it can seem like a long way off, but familiarise yourself with the requirements for completing school successfully. Knowing the process means you can keep an eye on progress, and if things are going off track - you'll know.

Find out if the school has a website where dates and events are listed. Check this regularly, as information will not always be forthcoming from your child. It will also help you to establish term dates, holidays, exam periods, and so on.

Keep the lines of communication open with your child's teachers. Don't expect them to know as much about your child as their primary school teacher did - they don't spend as much time with them. Don't prejudge the teacher based on stories from other parents; make your own judgements and when situations arise, work with your child's teachers to provide the best support network you can.

You must also keep the lines of communication open with your child. Try not to interrogate them, but show an interest in what they are doing. Don't pry, but encourage them to share both what they are doing and how they are feeling. Remember what it was like to be a teenager and support them.

Parent perspective

"When children start secondary school the lines of communication change - it's no longer teacher to parent, it's more likely to be teacher, child, parent (if it makes it that far). Since the main source of information about school will now be your child - with the odd newsletter and written correspondence from the school - make sure you keep the lines of communication open! Remember you're likely to be heading into the 'grunting' stage soon so you may have to work hard at it. Parent evenings and academic mentoring appointments are really important to attend; just don't expect the teachers to have the same level of knowledge of your child's personality as they did in primary school. It's a whole new ball game, especially if they are in a large school with large class sizes."