

# Understanding Primary to Secondary School Transition: What We Know and How We Can Make it Easier for Our Children

## WHAT WE KNOW

*Parental engagement with their children is particularly important at times of transition.*

*Dr Janet Goodall, University of Bath*

Transition is a fancy word for the move from primary school to secondary school. It can be a time of worry for some children and their families, as change can be scary as well as exciting!

We know that children worry about making friends, or whether they will know what to do in the first week. They worry that they might be invisible in their new school. Or will they be too visible? Will they be 'cool'? Will they be able to find their way around? Parents worry about these things too, as well as the more practical stuff. How will their child get to and from school? Will they like school lunches? Will they be physically safe? Who will look after them if anything goes wrong?

There are practical and emotional considerations when your child moves to a new school. There are plenty of things you can do to ensure that your child thrives, not just in September, but throughout their secondary years. Many parents don't know quite how important their role is.

### **Children who transition successfully into a new setting have many things in common:**

Loving and close relationships with their parents and those around them.

Parents who offer clear and consistent discipline, but are kind and affectionate.

Good communication and social skills.

A good sense of humour.

Some experience of being successful already in their lives.

A belief that they can influence outcomes in their lives (a sense of control over things).

Interests outside of school and lots of practice at making friends in different settings.

To help your child achieve a growth mindset, when they say they can't do something, suggest to them they can't do it...YET!

## WHAT TO DO AT HOME

### Choose an optimal parenting style.

There are many ways to parent. You can be severe and strict (authoritarian), loving but firm (authoritative) or pretty laid back about what goes on (laissez-faire). In Western culture, authoritative parenting is associated with successful kids. Children who are parented with love, boundaries and routine, don't just thrive academically, but are less likely to become involved in risky, anti-social or criminal behaviour! Your loving relationship with your child doesn't just keep them safe physically and emotionally, it gives them a secure base from which they can safely explore the world.

### Encourage a family growth mindset.

Carole Dweck is the Stanford psychologist who has transformed our understanding of what motivates children to learn. She discovered that children who have a growth mindset are more likely to do better at school and in life generally. These are children who believe that practice will improve their performance, that if they fail they can learn from it and that persevering and sticking to something is what really matters.

### Create a positive home learning environment.

Conversations about a child's day at school, or a specific activity, can have a positive impact on educational attainment. Children who live in homes with greater verbal engagement, interaction, stimulation and support, do better in school than other children. An everyday part of a positive home learning environment is making sure that your child has space to study, and that their achievements, however small, are highly valued within family life. Remember to praise their effort rather than their performance and this will help encourage a growth mindset, which can aid success in school.

### Model resilience.

'Modelling' is a concept frequently referred to by educators, but it lies at the core of great parenting too. It refers to how we model attitudes, behaviour and approaches to the children who live or work closely with us. Children can quickly absorb how their caregivers approach difficulties, relationships, good news or personal challenges. It makes sense to reflect on how we approach everyday challenges as individuals. For example, consider how you cope and react to various situations, from something as mundane as being stuck in a traffic jam, right through to how you manage the loss of a loved one. However you respond to pressure, rest assured, offspring are watching and learning!

## Your child might say they need a mobile phone in their room

**to use as a wake-up alarm. This really isn't necessary. Buy them a cheap alarm clock and keep phones firmly out of bedrooms at night. They need their sleep more!**

### **Ensure your children get enough sleep.**

Teens need their sleep for optimal learning at school and for their general wellbeing.

Find out why sleep matters: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-8b99rGpkM>

Or:

<https://www.familiesonline.co.uk/child/child-health/health-care-tips/the-importance-of-sleep-to-your-childslearning?jwsourc=cl>

### **Ensure good digital hygiene.**

We know that the amount of time young people spend online has trebled in the past 11 years. A report by Ofcom (2019) tells us that 34% of 5-15 year olds now have their own tablet, rather than using devices belonging to their parents or school. Many children get a phone for the first time when they go to secondary school – 50% of 10 year olds own their own phone. Unsurprisingly, increased usage generates increased risks. Young people are vulnerable to unwanted attention, exposure to upsetting or harmful material and cyber-bullying.

Parents can't do much about school start times but they can ensure that their teen is not taking technology into the bedroom at night. Tricky to enforce, but not impossible!

We need to remember that 'digital hygiene' begins at home and continues into school. Plenty of easy-to-follow e-guides and video resources are available to help you navigate the challenges that social media will bring:

<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/Listing/?cat=75&ref=4824#mMain>

**Despite your attempts to keep them safe, young people can easily bypass filters at home. Arguably, the most effective tool for keeping young people safe online is open and honest conversation. Young people need to know that adults will listen to any worries or disclosures relating to their digital life and will be there to help them work through occasional mishaps.**

### **Ever heard of the summer slide?**

"Summer learning loss, the phenomenon where young people lose academic skills over the summer, is one of the most significant causes of the achievement gap between lower and higher income young people" (Summer Learning Association).

Your child's teachers have worked hard to help your child get ready for the challenges of secondary school, but because of the summer holidays, this learning can be compromised. Unfortunately, the summer slide can be worse in families where parents are on a lower income. Higher-income families are more able to send their children to summer camps that focus on sports and skill development. They are also more able to take their children on holiday, which can greatly enrich learning. If you have a lower income but are keen to avoid the summer slide, please be reassured that it is what you DO with your child that matters. Here are some tips:

## **If you are unsure what to focus on over the summer holidays, look back at your child's most recent school report and identify their weak areas.**

### **Encourage them to read as many books as possible.**

The research evidence is clear: a home reading culture can greatly boost your child's academic attainment in the first years of secondary school. Try to create a reading culture at home over the summer (if you don't have one already). This means regular visits to the library, book shop or more book purchases on their Kindle. It also means talking about books as a family, your favourite books and your likes and dislikes. As a family, make sure that you value stories and words!

### **Engineer opportunities for them to practice writing.**

You may recall arriving at school in September as a child and not being able to hold the pen or pencil properly! This is likely because you hadn't touched or looked at a piece of school work since the long summer started. You want your child to arrive at a new school being able to hit the ground running.

Keep up their literacy by asking them to do simple things such as writing to relatives or pen-pals or sending postcards from places visited over the summer. Ask them to write down the shopping list and make notes for you. If you can, bring them into work for the day and consider what you might be able to delegate to them.

## **In the last week of the summer holidays, practise getting up earlier so the early mornings aren't such a shock to the system!**

### **Where chances arise to talk about numbers, take them!**

Let's face it, maths is a game-changer. It is arguably one of the most important subjects on the school curriculum. This is reflected in the fact that previously, without a C grade in GCSE Maths, your child would be unlikely to be accepted

onto a postgraduate degree or gain entry to a top university. Children who are good at maths earn more in later life too!

Start as you mean to go on by valuing numbers as a family. You don't need to be good at maths yourself to help them, but it is critically important that where you can, you assist them. You can greatly improve their maths by playing numbers-based board games at home. Equally, it doesn't hurt to hire a student who is studying maths to go over a few key concepts during the summer, or, if money is tight, ask a friend who is particularly able at maths to spend time with them.

### **Encourage them to collect new words.**

There is a big focus in secondary school on literacy; your child will be expected to write more essays than ever before, debate points and express themselves in class and on paper. You can help them get a head-start by being a family that values learning new words. Collect them as you would shells on the beach. Gather up the ones that appeal and encourage your child to bring them out for show in those creative writing tasks when they get to secondary!

### **Enjoy plenty of family time.**

This doesn't necessarily mean being together for days on end, but it does mean lots of 'family talk' – conversations, chats around the BBQ and generally chewing the fat. Focus on building their self-esteem and social confidence.

### **Ask yourself:**

Have I done everything I can to ensure that my child feels supported for the journey ahead to secondary school?

Have I made appropriate plans regarding how they will get to school and back each day when they start school? Is my child happy with this arrangement?

Have I reflected on my own experiences of secondary school and made sure not to transfer any negative thoughts onto my children?

Am I prepared to work in partnership with my child's teachers and support their work with my child?

Have I made sure, as far as possible, that my child comes from a positive home learning environment?

Does my child feel comfortable talking to me about any worries or concerns they might have about secondary school? When they talk to me, do I really listen? Or do I tend to dismiss their worries as unimportant?

Have I considered some of the issues that might arise if my child has a mobile phone for the first time going to secondary school?

Have we talked about social media use in general and the need to be 'kind online'? Have we considered a social media contract?

Is my child aware of what sexting is, cyber-bullying and the risks associated with conversing with others online?

Does my child know that no matter the volume of work/homework set by teachers, I am committed to helping them with this?

Have I set time aside over the summer to spend time with my child and really focus on their self-esteem, social skills and resilience?

Have I discussed bedtimes with my child and house rules about technology before school starts in September?

### Read More

Goodall, J. (2013)

Parental engagement to support children's learning: a six point model. *School Leadership & Management*, 33, 133-150.

Place2Be (2015)

The Transition from Primary to Secondary School: how an understanding of mental health and emotional well-being can help children, schools and families. Training Resource.

1.5.P. Nation, 1.5.P. (2013)

A brief critique of Hart, B. & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

### Websites

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2022>

<https://www.common sense media.org/cellphone-parenting/whats-the-right-age-for-parents-to-get-their-kids-a-cell-phone>