

GETTING READY FOR HIGH SCHOOL: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

PARENTS AND CARERS



Transitioning to high school is a major milestone for students, marking a period of immense growth, and many changes. For parents and carers of children with high support needs, this transition can bring about its own set of unique challenges and considerations, as children, parents and carers alike can feel a blend of excitement and apprehension. This fact sheet aims to provide parents and carers with resources and strategies to make this transition as smooth as possible.

Learning for young people with Down syndrome does not slow down or 'plateau' after leaving primary school. Research shows that, with the right support, many young adults with Down syndrome leave high school and pursue tertiary qualifications and post-school training.

Whilst primary school is a time to learn the 'basics', both academically and socially, high school is a time for targeted learning and skill development to prepare your child for life *after* school.

**What are your child's strengths and talents?
How can these be celebrated and harnessed to provide
a fulfilling, meaningful start to adulthood?**

Some families identify that the transition to high school can be a more challenging one than the transition to primary school.

A reason for this can be the pervading misunderstanding of what an 'inclusive education' really is. Research shows again and again that students with disabilities who are educated in mainstream education settings outperform those who are taught in segregated environments, but this - unfortunately - is not always promoted in high school settings. It is crucial to be aware both of the rights of your child, but also the responsibilities of the school, and the options available to you and your family.



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>>> Key Differences Between Primary and High School

- 1. Increased independence.** The main difference between primary school and high school is the increased level of independence expected from all students. From reading a timetable, scheduling tasks and homework, to navigating different classrooms throughout the day, high school can be overwhelming at first, in terms of these new expectations.
- 2. Multiple teachers and classrooms.** Unlike primary school where students usually have one main classroom teacher, high school involves different teachers for various subjects. These teachers are based in a range of classrooms, often over a much larger campus than a primary school. Students are expected to transition between these classrooms and arrive on time to their next class.
- 3. Greater academic demands.** The expectations of a high school in relation to the academic workload may be greater. This might mean students have a greater volume of work, their goals will be more challenging, or they might be juggling the workloads of several different subjects at the same time.
- 4. Social adjustments.** High schools are much larger places than primary schools, with many more students. Students might not be placed in classes with many students they know. Additional support in terms of building social skills with new people will be required.

>>> Tips for a Successful Start to High School:

Attend the Open Day of your chosen high school, even if the decision has already been made about which school your child will attend. This will give your child a chance to become familiar with the school grounds, but also gives parents and carers a chance to ask questions about the school.

Attend as many transition sessions as needed to ensure your child is familiar with their new school environment. Many children with additional needs feel more comfortable attending these sessions with a known professional from their primary school, e.g. support staff member, learning support teacher.

Gain access, as soon as possible, to your child's timetable. Colour-code the timetable or create a visual version of the timetable, so your child can read and use it independently.

Talk to your child's school about methods of communication. With many more teachers and new faces, it is important to establish open lines of communication, to establish who your point of contact will be for questions, big and small.

Research the specific school rules to see if there are any rules which are unique to your child's new school. For example, there may be certain areas of the school which are out-of-bounds, or certain rules for certain spaces, such as a woodwork room.

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Limit the commitment to extra-curricular activities or responsibilities in the first few weeks of school. Learning the new routines and expectations of high school can be very tiring and stressful at times. Finding a balance is key.

>>> Puberty and High School

It's important for parents to be proactive and understanding, acknowledging that puberty might bring physical, emotional, and social changes for their child.

Some quick tips for navigating this time of change, in relation to a high school setting:

- **Open communication.** Communicate openly with your child about puberty. Discuss bodily changes, emotions and personal hygiene before these changes start occurring.
- **Education and preparation.** Work closely with educators and school staff to ensure they are aware of your child's needs during puberty.
- **Promote independence.** Encourage your child's independence in self-care routines, such as personal hygiene practices. Offer guidance and support while allowing them to take on more responsibilities gradually.
- **Social and emotional support.** Help your child to navigate social situations and emotions which may arise because of puberty. Encourage friendships, foster social skills and address any concerns or anxieties they might have.
- **Individualised planning.** Any relevant health-related goals or concerns can be included in an Individual Education Plan (IEP). This ensures that all relevant stakeholders have access to the relevant information needed to support your child.
- **Consistent routine.** Have a consistent self-care routine at home, e.g. showering, shaving. This ensures these new skills are consolidated with your child, to build independence.



>>> Suggested Questions to Ask

- **Can my child be placed with a friend in their classes, particularly their home room?**
- **How soon can I have access to my child's timetable?**
- **Are additional transition dates available?**
- **Can we have early access to school resources? (e.g. google classroom, school diary)**
- **Is there a peer support program?**
- **Who will be my child's 'go-to' person? (e.g. homeroom teacher, support staff)**

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USEFUL LINKS:

NDIS

<https://www.ndis.gov.au/understanding/ndis-and-other-government-services/employment>

Raising Children Network

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens>

Volunteering Australia

www.volunteeringaustralia.org

References:

Buckley, S. (2007). *Educating students with Down syndrome in secondary school: A guide for parents and educators*. Portsmouth, NH: Woodbine House.

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