

# High school is overwhelming, for kids and parents. Here's how to get off to a good start.

By Katherine Reynolds Lewis

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The transition to high school is possibly the most fraught back-to-school season since kindergarten. Newly minted ninth-graders will be rubbing elbows with seniors who often tower a head above them. For the first time, grades really count. The workload will be more demanding. Then there's the non-school side of things: sports, clubs, activities, friends, parties, social media, drugs and more.

A new high school parent could be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed. Sure enough, when I started asking friends for advice to prepare my child (and myself) for the coming ninth-grade year, the most common response was: relax.

Experts I interviewed agreed with my friends. Their advice falls into four categories.

## Manage stress

"It has gotten ridiculous. There's so much academic pressure," says Mary Alvord, a psychologist and author of "Conquer Negative Thinking for Teens" and "Resilience Builder Program." "The anxiety of expectations is extremely high and the unknowns are so high."

Ninth-graders (and their parents) need to manage anxiety and stress in the days until school starts — and the years that follow. Help your child take the new steps and decisions one at a time, which makes them feel more manageable. Above all, stay healthy by getting enough sleep, exercise and downtime, Alvord says.

"You have to prioritize sleep," she says. "For parents that means setting some limits in terms of what screens are in the room."

Remind children of the new schools they started in the past and how they rose to the occasion. Or share stories of how relatives and friends tackled high school and what helped them succeed. Push back on the peer pressure to load up the schedule with advanced placement and honors classes. Talk to friends with older children to get some perspective — for your child and yourself.

Plan a fun fall activity with your child and consider doing a room reboot, suggests Paige Trevor, a professional organizer and certified parent educator with the Parent Encouragement Program in Kensington, Md. "Create a budget, repaint, declutter, frame new posters," she says. "High school is hard; it's great if your room is your dream room."

## Get involved

Another common recommendation: join a sports team. Your ninth-grader may feel more confident if they can connect with other students at practices. Many schools have a less-competitive team or sport

for those youngsters who aren't naturally athletic. It doesn't have to be sports — joining a club, interest group or even inviting other new students for ice cream in the backyard can break the ice. Ninth grade presents an opportunity to try something new, to reinvent yourself.

“A lot of success in high school is related to finding what you're passionate about, finding new interests,” says Kimberly J. Martin, principal of Woodrow Wilson High in Washington.

Clubs, activities and collaborative work in class lead to new friendships, which parents should ask about. “The biggest concern I see parents having is not will they make friends but who their friends are, concerns about having the ‘wrong’ kind of friends,” she says. “That's the place where parents should probably be quite diligent.”

### Encourage independence

In ninth grade, children should make more of their own decisions, if they haven't already started doing that. This means choosing classes, selecting clubs and learning to manage their time. (It's not your shot at a redo, to fix the mistakes you made in high school.)

“Try as much as possible to let students take a leadership role in selecting their classes,” Martin suggests. “Too often parents are in the driver's seat and they say more [Advanced Placement] classes and all honors and are very aggressive with the academics.”

The same goes for late assignments, help from teachers and other communications with the school. “The students who haven't yet learned to ask for help will often struggle. Learning to ask for help and advocate for themselves are skills that are really important,” she says. “Teachers don't love when a parent is the one asking for everything.”

Set up a structure of support without micromanaging, Trevor says. That may mean a weekly meeting where your child prints a grade report and you discuss it together. Help students find an organizational system that works for them, then let them handle things.

“The parent's job is to notice the success and to ask if the child needs any assistance,” Trevor says. “We want to mindfully switch from being in charge of our child to being our child's trusted adviser. That means we go from a W-2 with job security and benefits to a 1099 where we can get fired and we only work when asked.”

### Expect imperfection

Don't be surprised if your teen regresses in high school, becoming more sloppy and disorganized. “Sometimes to leap big, you have to go backwards for a bit,” Trevor says.

Expect students to make mistakes as they find the balance between work, play and other commitments, Martin says. They're learning how long it takes to prepare for a test, to complete reading, to finish a problem set and the like. Don't freak out if a B-minus comes home.

“Ninth and tenth grade are an adjustment period where students are figuring out who I am, what are my passions and how can I manage my time,” she says. “I would say to parents: Be patient, let the students figure it out.”

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