



How to Support Your Child's Secondary School Transition

A practical guide for parents and carers

Moving from primary to secondary school is a significant milestone in your child's life — one they know will bring real change. Whilst it brings exciting new opportunities for learning and independence, it can also be a time of uncertainty and anxiety for both children and their parents.

Most children adapt well, though some may need a little more support along the way, and it's perfectly normal for feelings to shift from excitement to nerves and back again.

As a parent or carer, there is much you can do to help your child to find their feet during this transition period.



Understanding the change

Why transition can feel so big

Secondary school brings many changes at once: a larger building, multiple teachers, a complex timetable, new subjects, and a different social landscape — all while your child is entering adolescence.

Research shows that common worries include making new friends, getting lost, managing homework, and meeting the expectations of different teachers.



What successful transition looks like

- Feeling a sense of belonging at the new school
- Developing new friendships and maintaining confidence
- Settling into new routines without major disruption
- Growing interest in new subjects and school life
- Continuing to learn and progress academically

Preparing for September

Visit and familiarise

Make the most of open days, transition days, and parent evenings. If you have a map of the school, look at it together.



Get the practicalities sorted early

- Order uniform in good time and check policies on jewellery and mobile phones.
- Find out how the canteen works, including the payment system.
- Practise packing a school bag the evening before — make it a habit now.
- Create a colour-coded timetable and a kit checklist for different days (PE, art, etc.).
- If your child will travel independently, plan the bus or walking route together.

Build the evening routine

Year 7 runs more smoothly for children who are prepared the night before. Help your child build a simple checklist: check tomorrow's timetable, pack the right books and equipment, sort PE kit. A simple list on the wall is more reliable than memory under morning-rush pressure.

Quick wins before September

- Practise buying food in a café or canteen-style setting
- Ensure a good bedtime routine is in place (young people need lots of sleep)
- Make sure your child has a planner or diary and knows how to use it
- Find out how the school communicates with parents (app, email, etc.)
- Ask friends with older children at the same school to share their experience

Talking about secondary school

Open the conversation early

The most valuable thing you can do is encourage your child to explore their thoughts and feelings. Let them know they can talk openly — about worries and excitement alike. Don't dismiss anxiety with "there's nothing to worry about"; instead, normalise it: feeling nervous is natural when facing something new.

Reassure them that nerves about starting something new are normal, as is some sadness at leaving familiar things, and that these feelings usually subside.



Be careful not to impose your own worries. Focus on exciting opportunities too – new subjects, activities and friends. Celebrating the milestone of finishing primary school, and all the ways they have grown, can boost self-esteem and confidence.

Questions that tend to get answers

“How was school?” rarely produces much. Try these instead, after they’ve had time to decompress:

- “What was the best bit of today?”
- “Was there anything that surprised you?”
- “Was there a moment that felt hard?”
- “Did you eat your lunch? Where did you sit?”
- “Is there anything you’d like to tell me, even briefly?”

Saying goodbye to primary school

Mark the end of primary school properly. Saying real goodbyes to friends and teachers matters. Talk about favourite memories and acknowledge what they’ll miss. This closure helps children look forward rather than backward.



Building confidence and independence

Building independence before September means your child arrives better equipped. Empower and support them to take steps towards independence, however big or small. For example:

- Encourage them to take on small responsibilities at home — getting themselves up, packing their own bag.
- Praise effort and progress, not just results.
- Practise asking for help. Role-play the words: “I’m not sure I’ve understood — could you explain it again?”
- Help them identify one or two friends from primary who are going to the same school.
- Encourage joining a club or activity early — shared interests build friendships faster than proximity alone.



Providing stability and security at home gives your child the confidence to explore and test their new environment. Knowing they can come back to you is one of the most powerful supports you can give.

Managing anxiety

What anxiety around transition can look like

Anxiety before or during transition is normal. However, watch for signs that it is becoming significant:

- Refusing to go to school after the first fortnight
- Persistent physical symptoms on school days (stomach aches, headaches)
- A marked change in sleep, eating, or mood that isn’t improving
- Repeatedly saying “nobody likes me” or “I can’t do this”
- Loss of interest in things that usually bring joy



Practical anxiety tools

- Give your child a small notebook for writing down worries — especially late at night when nothing can be done. Writing worries down prevents them escalating.
- Create a shared family experience: the evening meal is a relaxed space to talk about the day, with no pressure.
- Reassure your child that getting lost or receiving a detention is not a disaster — these are normal parts of settling in.
- If your child is very anxious, ask the new school about quieter spaces, lunchtime safe zones, and who they should go to.

A note on bullying

Many children worry about bullying before they start. While it does happen, it is less common than children fear. Talk to your child about what bullying actually is, what to do if they see or experience it, and who to tell. Having a clear plan reduces fear of the unknown.

If your child is neurodivergent

If your child has ADHD, autism, dyslexia, or another neurodivergent profile, the transition involves some additional planning.

The move to secondary school often brings changes to the support, routines and relationships that helped your child feel secure in primary school. Here are some ways you can help them adjust to these changes.



Help your child know themselves

Encourage regular reflection on what helps them learn and what makes things harder. Build a shared language around their strengths, sensory needs, and early signs that they're becoming overwhelmed.

Practice asking for help at home

Role-play simple scripts like "I don't understand, could you explain it again?" until they feel natural. A skill rehearsed under low pressure is far more likely to be used under stress.

Build portable strategies before September

Strategies practised in Year 6 are far more likely to transfer to Year 7 than ones introduced on day one. Prioritise:

- Planner use: teach it explicitly now so it becomes a habit before September.
- Help cards or non-verbal signals: establish these now so they feel familiar in a new environment.
- Sensory awareness: help your child name what environments feel manageable and which drain them.
- Script rehearsal: practise the words for asking for help until they feel ordinary.



Create a one-page profile together

A short, student-authored document that says “here’s what you need to know about me” is one of the most useful things you can give the new school. It could answer five questions:

- What helps me?
- What makes things harder?
- What are my early signs that things are building up?
- What should adults do when I seem overwhelmed?
- What should adults never do?

Written with your child rather than for them, even a few sentences in their own words carries more weight than a polished adult document.

Talk to the new school before September

Schools can only support what they know about. Don’t assume information from primary will transfer automatically. Key things to establish:

- Who is the named adult your child can go to?
- Where is the quiet or safe space, and how do they access it?
- How does the lunch system work, and is there a quieter option?
- Are there any additional transition visits available?

What to watch for in the first half-term

Many neurodivergent children hold themselves together all day at school and fall apart at home. This is not putting it on — home is the one place they can let go. It is exhausting for everyone but it is normal.

If your child is struggling significantly after the first fortnight — refusing to go, showing physical symptoms, or very distressed — contact the school sooner rather than later. You often spot these signs before the school does.

Working with school

Secondary school is different for parents and carers, too. The close contact you had with your child’s primary teacher is replaced by a larger, less familiar system. Most schools hold thorough inductions for families and have clear pastoral support structures — take full advantage of these from the start.

Key people to know

- Form tutor — your child’s first point of contact day to day
- Head of Year — for anything pastoral or more serious
- SENCO — Special Educational Needs Coordinator, if your child has additional needs
- School office — for day-to-day queries and absence



How to contact school effectively

When something isn't working, be specific and collaborative rather than general. A useful approach:

"I wanted to flag that the last two weeks have been really hard at home after school. I'm seeing [X, Y and Z]. I don't know what's behind it but I wanted to make you aware. Could we have a quick conversation about what's going on and what might help?"

This sets up a partnership rather than a complaint, which leads to better outcomes for your child.

What to expect in the first weeks

The first half-term is often the most demanding part of the transition to secondary school. Children are adjusting to new routines, environments, expectations and relationships all at the same time. Many young people initially cope well through the excitement and novelty of starting secondary school, but may find the transition feels more challenging as the weeks go on and fatigue builds. It is common for difficulties to become more noticeable around the October half-term, as the reality of the new routine settles in.

You might notice

- Afternoon and evening tiredness or emotional overwhelm after school - your child may have spent much of the day managing social, sensory and learning demands. "I'm fine" might mean "I survived" — both are valid responses.
- Small things feeling huge: a wrong room, a forgotten pencil case. Don't dismiss the feeling even if the cause looks small.
- Sleep, food, and mood disruption — this usually settles within a few weeks.



When to step in

A useful rule of thumb: if something is a one-off, watch it. If it's a pattern, gently raise it. If it's affecting sleep, mood, or willingness to go to school, raise it with the school sooner rather than later.

Remember: you don't have to have all the answers, and you don't have to do this alone. The school is there to help. Between you, the school, and your child, you have everything you need.

Further resources

The following organisations offer excellent free guidance for parents:

- YoungMinds – [youngminds.org.uk/parent](https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent) (mental health and transition advice)
- Anna Freud Centre – [annafreud.org](https://www.annafreud.org) (transition resources for families and schools) [including video on moving up to watch with your child](#)
- Parentkind – [parentkind.org.uk](https://www.parentkind.org.uk) (practical guides for parents at every school stage)
- BBC Bitesize – [bbc.co.uk/bitesize](https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize) (secondary school subject support for young people)
- Internet Matters – [internetmatters.org](https://www.internetmatters.org) (online safety guidance for secondary age)
- Anti-Bullying Alliance – [anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/advice-for-parents](https://www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/advice-for-parents)
- Pooky Knightsmith – [pookyknightsmith.com](https://www.pookyknightsmith.com) (transition for neurodivergent children)
- Specialist Teacher Advisory Service – [hants.gov.uk/stas](https://www.hants.gov.uk/stas)

Compiled from guidance by Anna Freud Centre, Hampshire Educational Psychology, YoungMinds, Parentkind, Pooky Knightsmith, Hampshire Specialist Teacher Advisory Service (STAS) and London Borough of Merton.