



GUEST POST

Guiding Our Children Through Transitions: High School

Sharon Sevier | Aug 13, 2014

So you have a high school student. You sit in the roller coaster car as you climb the incline of freshman year, sophomore year, then begin the crazy roller coaster into junior year and, ultimately, arrive at the end, senior year. These next four years will fly by, so hang on.

I love high school students. For the most part, their arrival at high school ends the drama of middle school. You can talk to high school students; they can be reasoned with and they can see logic, even though they still may think they're all that. Walking through the doors of high school, students get that sense of "Wow! Everything counts, this is all serious stuff." And it really is. It's the first time they have to think about graduation requirements, building a transcript and the importance of performing well. They begin thinking about what they want to do post-secondary. This is heading into real life. They do all this while balancing an extra-curricular life and a social life. Balancing the various segments of life is part of being a successful high student.

For parents, the apron strings are pretty much frayed to the last thread by the end of senior year. Kids become vastly more independent. They may start driving, dating, and working at their first jobs. Family time wanes as their teenage lives begin to travel at warp speed. They are hurtling toward their future, and all we can do as parents is hang on for dear life.

Here's our survival checklist:

- **Be involved.** Most high schools offer parent meetings for incoming freshmen. It's a great idea to attend and learn as much as you can. For sure, your child isn't going to tell you! Attend parent-teacher conferences and find out information about the curriculum and assignments. Get registered for the parent portal of the student management system, and stay abreast of your child's performance in each class. Contact teachers or the school counselor if you have questions. Don't assume that, now that your child is in high school, s/he can handle things on their own. Your monitoring will serve to keep them on track and aware that you are checking! Join the parent association and learn what's going on at school. Attend events or offer to volunteer for a committee. You want to be connected to the school to really know what's going on because, once again, your child is not likely to tell you!

- **Course selection: listen to the experts.** Successful course selection includes completing state or district's graduation requirements and taking courses that match ability level. It's critical to pay attention to any teacher recommendations for course levels. I've rarely seen a teacher get it wrong in their recommendation for a student. They work with their students day in and day out and they know how that student learns, completes work, and performs on tests. I've heard many parents say, "but I know Johnny can do this" when contemplating a certain course level. My immediate response is always the same. "I agree that Johnny can do this, but will he?" That's the million dollar question. Parents need to be realistic, yet supportive, about their kids. You've been watching this child for 14 years now. Habits are pretty well-established. It's rare that kids make a total turn-around once in high school. Talk to the previous teacher, talk with the school counselor, and look at past grades and habits. Then choose courses that will stretch your child a bit, but remember that they aren't Gumby. We want kids to feel challenged, but not overwhelmed and drowning.

● **Help with the balancing act between academics, athletics, and social life.** We want our children to be successful students, to feel connected to their school, and to have friends and activities for fun times, but it all has to be carefully balanced. First, school is their job and what should be a student's priority. Class choice and grades will play a big part in determining post-secondary options. It's even more critical to have a set time and non-distractible place to study and do homework. Let me say one thing about homework; some schools no longer count homework for a grade. Kids say "it doesn't count, so why do it?" That thought gets them into hot water. Homework is practice of the skills and concepts taught during class. It's much more prudent to say, "I don't get it" on a homework paper, knowing you can ask the teacher to clarify the next day, than to say "I don't get it" on a test or quiz. Whether it counts or not, insist that your child does the homework. After all, practice makes perfect.

If your child is involved in athletics, clubs, or other activities, seriously consider the time commitment required. A study hall during a sports season can turn out to be a godsend. It may be that you and your family may need to alter patterns to balance study time with the activity. Pay attention to those things up front, not when things have fallen into crisis mode.



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● **Be a parent, not a pal.** High school comes with all kinds of social events; spectator games, dances, and proms. There will be parties, movies, and just hanging out. Set reasonable expectations regarding how many nights you want your child out and time of curfew. Monitor who they are with and where they are going, as well as what they are doing. You will be labeled "over-protective" but that's ok. Be a parent, not a pal. Each year in the fall and spring, I drive into the parking lot of my high school and see signs that say, "Those Who Host Lose The Most." Those signs are for those parents who want to be the "cool" parents. These are the parents who serve alcohol at parties and/or are non-present with regard to supervision. Some defend their actions by saying they take the keys, or they trust their children. Let's get real here, folks. Providing alcohol for minors, regardless of whether or not you take the keys, is against the law in most states. Get caught and you're in a pickle. The liability alone is staggering. I've never heard a parent say, "well, I got the permission of each child's parent to give them alcohol at the party." That's because most parents would say "no way." And, you trust your child? Seriously? You trust a 14, 15, 16, or 17 year old?? Hey, I've got some swell swamp land for sale that I'd like you to see. What a bargain.

Here's a true story. My kids knew I would always call parents whenever they wanted to go to a party or do something with other kids. I wanted to know for sure about the supervision. My ego was perfectly intact knowing I wasn't the "cool" mom. So, one day my son asked to go to a party. I told him I'd call the parent, and would let him know. I'm sure I got the eye roll, but he didn't say a word. I called the hostess of the party and asked if she would be present for the entire party. I heard her suck her breath in a little, and she said, "well!!! I trust my children!" I persisted until I got the answer I was looking for. Yes, she and her husband would be present for the party. My son went to the party and, when I picked him up after, I found him out on the lawn playing a game with some guys. As we drove home, I asked how the party was; I got a "good" as an answer. I

pushed a little and asked why he was outside instead of inside. He was quiet for a minute and then he blurted it out, “Mom, someone had a knife at the party, so I got out of there.” Swallowing the bile that rose in my throat, I calmly praised him for having the sense to remove himself from that situation. Then I asked where the parents were. They were upstairs all night. He told me details of kids throwing food, cans of soda, and just being disrespectful of another person’s home.

Yeah, I wasn’t the “cool” mom, but I sure was the mom. Setting firm boundaries and expectations, demanding respect and courtesy, and allowing natural consequences for screw-ups will actually be appreciated by your kids. These types of parameters show that you care and you value your child’s health, safety and welfare. They might be mad, but it won’t last long, trust me. And if it does, just wait until they have kids of their own. You’ll be the smartest person on the planet.

● **Seek knowledge, listen and learn about post-secondary planning. Don’t be afraid to seek the help of experts.** The ultimate goal of parents is to launch their children into a career that will sustain them and keep them from moving back home. Seriously, we all want our kids to be successful, be in a career that they love, and earn enough money to be totally independent. There are many options for students after graduation. It’s important to be supportive of their dreams, but also realistic. Here are a few tips:

1. With the assistance of your school counselor, map out a five year (four years of high school and the first year of post-secondary) plan of coursework that leads to the dream post-secondary option of your child. Having that “road map” can help your child be realistic about plans, and can also serve to motivate them to do well. It’s not set in stone; adjustments are expected every year as course offerings or goals change. But having that map ensures that requirements will be met, and planning is on course. It also serves as a valuable reality check as they evaluate courses, grades and goals.
2. Encourage your child to look for job shadowing opportunities in fields of interest. These opportunities offer students valuable connections to people in the field. Those professionals can talk about necessary coursework and training, grades needed for programs, characteristics for being successful on the job, what they like/dislike about their job, starting salary and working conditions. Kids will walk away from career shadowing feeling one of two ways: 1) I loved this and really want to pursue it, or 2) it was fun but no thanks! Both of those are critical pieces of information. It’s a valuable taste of reality from an expert in the field, and you aren’t put in a position of being told you don’t know anything. Plus, it very well could save your child’s college education from being the most expensive career exploration program you or s/he ever paid for!
3. **Talk with your school counselor about post-secondary planning.** Learn the timelines, familiarize yourself with online programs that offer college and career searches, attend the meetings on financial aid. Don’t wait for your child to bring that information home; you go and do your own homework and get knowledgeable. Your school counselor can guide you on what programs might be best for your child’s dreams. They know which tests are required for entrance, and the best times to take them. School counselors are fabulous guides through the post-secondary planning process. They are your ultimate resource and their services are free.

● **If you discover that your child is struggling academically, socially, emotionally, or with substance abuse or other serious issues, get help fast.** With increased independence comes temptations, and there are plenty out there. It’s critical to be observant of your child and of their friends. Keep track of academic progress. Notice changes in behavior. Don’t try to explain things away. Be honest. Too many parents try to hide their child’s struggles. They are fairly quick about notifying the school about academic problems, but not about the other types of challenges. It’s not anything to be embarrassed about if your child runs into challenges; it doesn’t mean you’re not a good parent. It means your child is struggling and help is needed. They may be drowning but remember that you have valuable personnel around you who hold a life vest. Collaborate with your school counselor; let them provide suggestions for assistance, run interference with the academic side of things, be an objective sounding board for both you and your child, be the link between outside professionals and the schools. At these times, parents need someone in their corner who can think objectively and unemotionally. School counselors are not there to judge; they are there to support you through a trying time. As I’ve talked with parents who are at their wits’ ends, I’ll offer to take the lead on school while they deal with things at home. Just knowing they don’t have to handle everything can be a great relief to a family. Keep us in the loop, and let us help.

I could write for hours about high school but, hopefully, these tips will help you stay connected and informed through to graduation. These next four years will fly by, and then it's time for the next transition...

This piece is part of a series examining how parents can help children through school transitions. Check out some of the other posts about [starting elementary school](#), [transitioning to middle school](#) and [sending kids off to college](#).

About the Author

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Dr. Sharon Sevier is a Licensed Professional Counselor in the State of Missouri, and currently serves as the Director of Advocacy for the Missouri School Counselor Association. She has been in education for 40 years and likes to say "Raising kids today takes courage, honesty, and a great sense of humor. It's a great privilege to be able to work with students and families as we all navigate this great life journey."