

Junior High Jitters: Transitioning to the Teenage Years

When transitioning to junior high school, it is common for both parents and youth to experience some anxiety about upcoming changes and unknowns such as:

- A new and often larger school building
- A change in connection to friends as some may be attending different schools
- Moving between different classes and teachers
- Getting lost or being late for class
- Keeping up with increased school work
- Going to school with older students
- Changes around transportation and lockers
- Personal safety and peer pressure
- Exposure or temptation around drugs/alcohol

Not Just External Changes, But Internal Changes

Besides the changes to their environment, youth also experience many developmental changes that occur in the teen years. Not only do youth experience outward (and sometimes awkward) physical changes in puberty, the adolescent brain experiences incredible and essential change that fosters critical thinking and readies youth for future independence.

Video: Teen Brain HD by teenmentalhealth.org
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGdlpaWi3rc>

Stress Is Needed But Watch for Problems

The stress or 'jitters' that we may feel in times of change are often the result of our body just getting us ready to solve a problem, overcome a challenge, or reach a goal. We need some stress every day to get ourselves going, to stay focused, and to energize us to do our best. However, too much stress or a lack of good coping skills can hinder our performance. Signs of distress may be:

- **Physical:** Headaches, stomach aches, sweaty palms, racing heart, difficulty sleeping, etc.
- **Emotional:** Crying, anger, loneliness, forgetfulness, irritability, hopelessness, indecisiveness, worry, difficulty concentrating, etc.
- **Behavioural:** Drinking, smoking or using drugs, withdrawal or avoidance, aggression, restlessness, changes to eating and sleeping habits

Find Coping Skills that Work For You

Before going to junior high school, you can prepare for change by practicing stress reducing techniques that you can use in stressful moments:

- **Deep relaxing breathing:** Through your mouth, slowly exhale all the air in your lungs then slowly inhale until your abdomen expands, and repeat.
- **Positive self-talk:** Be aware of how you think and speak about yourself. Change negative self-judgement to positive and more encouraging words.
- **Take care of the basics:** Be intentional about getting enough sleep, eating healthy foods, and exercising; give your body what it needs to thrive!

Preparing for New Surroundings

- Attend the new school's open house/orientation days or request a private tour before fall classes start
- Ask for a school map or take a picture of the schools posted fire exit diagrams to learn the building layout. Once you know where classes are, plot them out on the map. Save a picture or make an extra copy of this.
- Get familiar with new bus/walking routes ahead of time
- Practice using a locker combination lock
- Review the school's student handbook and become familiar with the rules and the daily/weekly schedule

Managing Academics

- Encourage summer reading to retain skills
- Regularly organize your backpack/binders/and school supplies so they are easy to find and ready to use
- Parents should meet with teachers early in the school year to discuss strengths and needs. Discuss any concerns around learning and requests for special accommodations with the appropriate staff
- Use calendars, agendas, and the school's online websites to keep track of upcoming assignments and exams and to monitor progress

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- Create consistent routines for homework/review; shorter frequent study sessions are proven to be more effective than occasional study marathons (cramming)
 - Set up a dedicated study space at home in an area with limited distractions and access to supplies
 - Parents – acknowledge your youth’s academic efforts and persistence more than outcomes or grades

Navigating Social Situations and Making Friends

- Maintain already established trusted friendships
- Join extracurricular clubs or teams to meet new people with similar interests
- Be a good listener; ask people about themselves
- Be aware of your body language; be relaxed, friendly, and attentive – open to connecting with others
- Maintain healthy hygiene and grooming practices
- Take a break from technology and connect in-person
- Show kindness and offer to help others
- Parents and youth - talk together about what each of you feels is important in a good friend and talk about behaviours that can damage friendships. Have some relaxed one-on-one time with each other every day in order to build and maintain trust, provide reassurance, and keep communication open

Resources

- <http://au.reachout.com/how-to-make-friends>
- Anxiety Canada: www.anxietycanada.com
- Kids Mental Health: www.kidsmentalhealth.ca
- Teen Mental Health: www.teenmentalhealth.org
- Understood: www.understood.org