



VERTUS WARRIORS

Teens and Transitions Are Not for the Faint of Heart

One of the hardest things for a human being to do is change. We as adults know that change is a natural, expected part of life. Now put yourself in the shoes of a young boy in Rochester New York. It seems that all you do is face change. While some people thrive on change, most experience some level of discomfort around transitions. Moreover, some people really struggle when adjusting to a new situation. For teens, change can be particularly difficult; perhaps one of the biggest challenges of teen transitions is that they are taking place against a backdrop of change. Their bodies are changing, their social hierarchies and norms are changing...even their relationship with you is changing.

As parents and guardians, our job is to navigate them through this phase in their lives. I always thought it amazing how a short span (4 years of high school), could have such a profound impact on their future. If your student navigates this transitional phase well the payoff is huge at the end and the opposite if they navigate it poorly.

Many teen transitions center around school: returning to school after summer break, advancing to a new grade level, starting in a new school after a geographic move, or beginning middle or high school. These transitions can be extremely intimidating to an adolescent. Your child might worry about their social status (Will the cool kids like me? Will I be bullied? Will I have friends to eat lunch with?) ...logistics (Will I be able to find my way to class? How will I know which bus is mine?) ...and performance (Will I be able to keep up with my homework?). Young love relationships can be very intense, and teens can be devastated when a deep attachment to a boyfriend or girlfriend is severed. They can feel a profound loss, and a breakup can trigger rumors or a fall in popularity; this can cause isolation.

Chances are, these types of concerns are on their minds, whether they're talking about them or not—and sometimes, whether they're even conscious of them or not.

As adolescents become more independent from you, their social relationships become more central to their lives—and their identity. Even more so than adults, teens judge themselves on how others view them. So, it is key for us as parents to really know who our kids hang out with, the identity they are trying to create with this group, and if these peers help him navigate this transitional phase from boyhood to manhood.

So, what do you do?

Our children take cues from us, so it is important to have a healthy attitude towards change yourself. Do not let your concerns cloud their experience. The challenges teens face during a transition can have a ripple effect, influencing their sense of self, their relationships (with peers and with you) and their performance in school.

It is important to note that the onset of alcohol and drug use is most common during transitions. Adolescents often turn to drugs and alcohol to combat low self-esteem, loneliness, anxiety and depression—and to mentally check out of challenging family situations or school trouble. Many will use substances to ease their social anxiety, to “look cool,” boost their image/reputation, and to fit in with a certain crowd.

As the guardian of an adolescent young man, it is important to recognize the transitions in your child's life, and to lend support as they navigate through these changes.

Following are 10 specific things you can do to ease the challenges of a transition:

1. **Allow for feelings.** Teens are going to have a lot of feelings—and they're going to have a lot of big feelings. It's important to let them have these feelings.

2. **Listen.** One of the most helpful things you can do for your adolescent is to listen to their stories, hear their concerns, and empathize with their feelings—without judgment.

3. **Preserve routines.** As much as possible, try to keep the same morning, after-school, evening, and bedtime routines in place. Routines lend familiarity and predictability, which can be threatened during times of transition.

4. **Ensure self-care**—for both you and your teen. Nutritious meals, quality sleep, exercise, and stress management allow you to stay strong, especially during trying times. A lot of teens begin to buck breakfast and push the limits on bedtime; while respecting the changes in their needs and wants, maintain a focus on healthy habits.

5. **Maintain boundaries.** It's tempting to loosen the discipline when your child is going through a hard time, but rules and boundaries build trust. Kids know what they can count on, and what they can push against. Be consistent in your parenting, allowing natural consequences and imposing logical consequences when their behavior crosses the line.

6. **Offer choices.** Teens often feel a lack of control, and even more so during times of transition. Where possible, allow them to voice their opinions, form their own likes and dislikes and make choices. Make sure you are okay with either choice you offer.

7. **Stay realistically positive.** Remind your teen of accomplishments. You might remind them about the time that they were really anxious about their performance in a school play that went really well, or about a new friend they made on their first day of camp. By doing so, you are giving your child tangible examples to counter their anxiety in facing this change.

8. **Separate your anxiety from theirs.** Recognize that you may have unresolved "stuff" from your adolescence that gets triggered by your teen's experiences. Stay in your own lane, using caution to not blur your journey with theirs. Take an honest look at your feelings, and try to pinpoint the cause of your anxiety—without making it theirs.

9. **Don't project your worries.** As mama lion (or papa bear), you want your child to avoid discomfort—and to succeed. But your concerns about any given transition may not be theirs. Even if you're worried about your teen making new (and the right) friends, they might not be the least bit concerned—until you plant seeds of doubt by asking anxiety-provoking questions ("Are you nervous about making new friends?").

10. **Ask for help.** If you feel like things are getting out of control, or you see that your teen is so anxious that they're not sleeping or if you're worried about drug and alcohol use, reach out to a professional who can help guide your teen—and you—through a challenging transition.

It can be hard to know what you don't know. Adolescent transitions can be unnerving, but they also facilitate growth—not only for your teen, but also for your relationship with them.