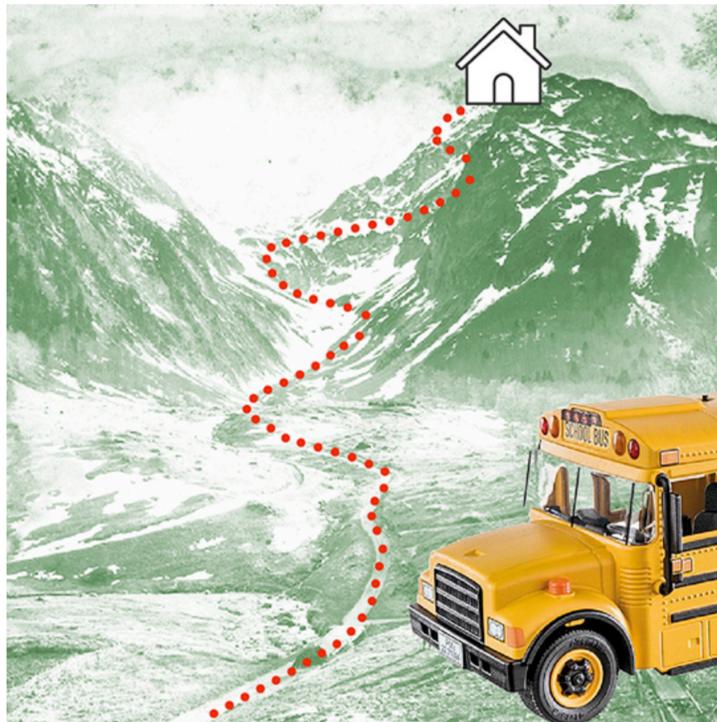




## Transition to Secondary School

**Starting a new school, or moving from primary to secondary education, especially if it involves a change of centre, can be an overwhelming time for any child. It can be particularly difficult for adopted children and those living in foster families or residential care. Actions such as allowing them to get to know the school and a teaching staff member can help reduce anxiety and facilitate adjustment to the new environment.**

Starting high school is a significant event for all kids. Many primary and secondary schools have well-established procedures to facilitate the transition for primary pupils. For those who have not always had the sensitive support of adults during their childhood and those who have experienced drastic changes in their life trajectories, the transition can be particularly overwhelming. Conscious or subconscious memories of unpleasant or dramatic shifts in the past can add an extra layer of complexity and anxiety. The same can happen when a child or adolescent changes schools for whatever reason. It may even coincide with other significant changes in their lives, such as moving from residential care to a new family or from one centre to another. These modifications are already highly stressful situations where everything familiar disappears. They must adapt to new spaces, people, norms, and routines.



Those who have experienced early adversity may need extra help to ensure their well-being at school. Challenging behaviours may be linked to a child's early life experiences, and strategies that succeed in the classroom with other children may not prove effective with them. Parents and caregivers can provide information about any specific needs or things to keep an eye on, together with strategies to facilitate their adjustment and well-being. A meeting before classes start offers the opportunity to obtain information about the young person's interests, strengths and concerns, which can be precious for teachers.

Some cases require you to define a joint plan to accompany the transition, with communication mechanisms between the parties essential for some.

It is crucial to ensure that all staff, including ancillary staff, are aware of any specific needs a child may have. You can browse the Brighter Future Library to find information about specific concerns, including xxxxx, xxxxxx, xxxxx.

Of course, no two kids are the same. But there are some strategies which they and their caregivers have told us have improved their experiences when moving from primary to secondary school:

- **Getting familiar with the new setting**

Let youngsters familiarise themselves with the new environment in advance and meet some of the staff. A great idea is to visit the facilities more than once before the school year starts. Go after school hours if the change occurs when the school year has begun. Draw a map or take pictures of buildings or rooms to help kids remember and become familiar with their new environment. Scheduling a meeting, or just having a soft drink, with a teacher willing to act as a reference point may also help greatly.

- **How are things going?**

Check in with them to find out about their well-being and how well they are coping academically. Some pupils can struggle to fit in, make friends, and develop relationships in positive peer groups. Remember that feeling safe and welcome is a priority: feelings of isolation, anxiety or stress will jeopardise the possibility of acquiring new learning.

- **Address any problems early on.**

Build in a "check-in" process with the pupil and their parents or carers to address any transitional problems. Work with them to problem-solve any issue of concern and provide additional support if necessary. Acknowledge and legitimise their discomfort and ask what might help them. In some cases, you may need to work with parents, caregivers and other professionals. It is essential that the young person feels part of the process and that their needs and demands form its keystone.

- **A point person**

Appointing a staff member to act as a key contact that students can go to for support will help them feel valued and supported. This key adult can gradually build a relationship with a pupil by greeting them on arrival, showing genuine interest, giving them special tasks or responsibilities, and making positive comments. This person should continue to be available to the pupil when they feel anxious or need help. Ideally, this staff member would remain constant as the student moves through the school years.

## Recommendations for parents and caregivers

How parents or primary caregivers approach this transition can shape a young person's experience. Here are some recommendations that may help:

- **Listen to your young person**

Take time to sit with them and talk about their expectations and concerns. Do not minimise their worries or views; on the contrary, do your best to show empathy and understanding. Ask them what could help with specific concerns. Remind them of their strengths and past successes, such as when they were worried or learning something new and ultimately succeeded.

- **Visit the setting in advance and practice the route to and from school**

Visiting the new school when it is not crowded lets youngsters become familiar with the facilities and the staff. Anticipate the trips by taking pictures and drawing maps or printing them off, if possible.

- **Provide helpful information**

A meeting with the teaching staff before classes start may be essential for a successful transition. Prepare for the arrangement by making a script of what is important to convey. Try to establish the basis for positive communication, including other people (social worker, psychologist, etc.), if needed.

- **Plan extra time together**

It's a good idea to plan to do something enjoyable together during the first few weeks at the new school. Whether it's ice cream, playing cards, cooking, or going for a walk, any relaxed activity you know you enjoy together can provide valuable moments of reassurance. It's also a chance for them to share their achievements or concerns.