

The parent-teen relationship: So high school

Here's a roadmap for adults to help kids navigate ninth through 12th grade

Proms. Friday night football. Advanced placement classes. It's all on the mind of a child starting high school. And it comes at a time when the kid is becoming more independent from their parents. So naturally, the transition can bring some mental health challenges like anxiety, self-doubt and longing.

"Kids become more centered on their looks because they're developing differently," says Sara Bennett, a psychotherapist at OSF HealthCare. "Guys might ask 'how come that guy is six feet tall all of the sudden and I'm still five foot two?'. It changes our self-concept, self-image, how we feel about ourselves and our confidence level."

"We see girls start to take a step back a little bit," Bennett adds. "They don't want to be the smartest one in the class. They're sitting back. What their friends think about them is way more important than what Mr. Smith in chemistry thinks about you."

Bennett also notes the sheer size of high school can be intimidating. Maybe the child went from small classes in a small building to being a freshman in a big pond with many teachers and coaches to get to know.

"There's a lot happening in kids' brains as they mature and go through those teenage years. As parents, we have to shift our mindset a little bit to be a better supporter and not so much that manager," Bennett says.

Having the conversation

Curious, consistent and connected.

Those are the ideals Bennett says to keep in mind when parents and teachers are talking to kids about heavy high school issues. Ask about what's going on and how it made the child feel, but be curious, not nosy and judgmental. Stay connected with your teenager, but understand that everyone has a busy schedule. A family dinner every night may not be possible, but catch up on the drive to soccer practice.

"Let them know you're there to celebrate their wins and move through difficulties. Make the little moments matter," Bennett says. "How can I help?" or "What's a good outcome for this?" are good phrases to use.

"Figure out who they are, what success means to them and how you can best support them," Bennett adds, noting an eight-year-old's priorities will differ greatly from a 14-year-old's priorities. "Having those open conversations and allowing them to be themselves means they're more likely to come to you when stuff gets tough. If they feel there's a lot of judgement and condemnation and not a lot of support, they're probably going to go to other people or hold it inside. Then the parent is going to be on the outside of the relationship instead of the inside."

For a child whose success means good grades, the conversation might include setting expectations in that area. Does the expectation mean certain grades? Certain advanced courses? Or just trying your best? If expectations are or are not met, what are the rewards or consequences? Expectations about social situations like parties could mean a pledge to not drink or use drugs. The parents could also promise to pick up the child from a sticky situation, like an out-of-control party, without judgement.

"Evidence-based research shows the more we connect with our kids in that way and not shy away from these conversations, the more likely they are to stay away from the riskiest decisions," Bennett says.

Learn more

Read more about helping kids with their mental health on the [OSF HealthCare website](#). Mental health care at OSF includes [clinicians and support groups](#) at hospitals like the one Bennett works at, the under-construction [Meadowview Behavioral Hospital](#) in Peoria, Illinois, and free resources like [behavioral health navigators](#) and [SilverCloud](#).