

NAVIGATING HIGH SCHOOL #1: TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CARERS OF AUTISTIC STUDENTS

Starting high school and navigating that journey is a major milestone which can be challenging for both the Autistic student and their family. The below tips (not exhaustive) reflect input from a team of Autistic young adults, along with Autistic and non-Autistic parents and teachers of Autistic high school students.

1. MEET WITH YOUR YOUNG PERSON'S SCHOOL EARLY AND BE COLLABORATIVE AND TRANSPARENT.

Let the school know you would like to create a working partnership with them. Be open about your young person's strengths and challenges. Keep the school informed of key diagnoses, developments at home and other information that could assist teachers and staff to provide more understanding and support.

2. ENSURE YOU ARE WELL CONNECTED TO YOUR YOUNG PERSON'S SUPPORT TEAM AT SCHOOL.

Understand the role that each individual plays and who to contact when certain issues arise for example: a Year Coordinator or Learning Support Teacher. Agree on preferred methods of keeping in touch to raise concerns and provide feedback. Follow up meetings to confirm your understanding of commitments and next steps. Also ensure that your child's support teams – both inside and outside of school – are connected with one another.

3. INVOLVE YOUR YOUNG PERSON IN DISCUSSIONS RELATED TO THEIR OWN SCHOOL PROGRAM.

(to the extent that they are willing to take part) Make sure to include how to best support their sensory needs. This approach models respect for their voice and helps them develop self-advocacy skills.

4. TOGETHER, DEVELOP AN EASY-TO-DIGEST PROFILE FOR TEACHERS AND STAFF.

Many of our I CAN mentees create their own 1-page-profile which captures their personal strengths and passions. This is a great way for teachers to form a connection. Also include known causes of distress like 'being called on in class' and things that calm and soothe such as sketching or taking a break.

5. REMEMBER THAT NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOUR YOUNG PERSON'S MENTAL WELL-BEING.

The teen years can be a particularly challenging time for many Autistics, especially with the added pressure of school. Take mental health days, reduced schedules and/or demands during times of heightened anxiety. Lean on professional support and immerse your young person in their passion. These are some of the ways you can help protect their mental well-being.



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STUDENT FEELS COMFORTABLE
CONFIDING IN A SCHOOL
COUNSELLOR OR STAFF MEMBER
ESPECIALLY DURING THE FIRST
SEMESTER. MAKE SURE THEY
ALSO HAVE A TRUSTED ADULT
THEY CAN TURN TO FOR EXAMPLE
A PSYCHOLOGIST OR MENTOR TO
CUSHION THOSE EARLY DAYS.**



6. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF 'HACKS' TO STAY ON TRACK.

One of the biggest adjustments to high school is keeping on top of everything: complex timetables, multiple teachers, special events. Here are our favourite tried-and-tested approaches:

1. Colour coding class schedules (keep multiple copies handy) and folders for each subject.
2. Setting a smart watch/phone timer every morning for key reminders (e.g. medication)
3. Creating a whiteboard with a weekly timetable, including extra-curriculars, appointments and items required.
4. Packing/laying out everything the night before, including uniform and lunch.

7. PROTECT AFTER SCHOOL 'DOWN TIME'

Getting through the day at high school can take a lot out of an Autistic young person. You might find that they need ample time to decompress after school, without a lot of questions or demands. Consider keeping after school obligations or appointments to a bare minimum, if possible, especially during the first term. Activities can always be added at a later date, if desired.

8. HELP MITIGATE SOME OF THE STRESS OF HOMEWORK.

These can be quite overwhelming for Autistic students, especially young people who crave a clear delineation between school and home. Strategies for mitigating this potential source of stress include:

1. Taking advantage of 'homework club' if your school offers one.
2. Only do homework when everything is calm. As soon as tension arises, stop! Break the work down into smaller tasks which can be checked off.
3. Engage a more senior high school student or uni student who shares similar passions with your young person to serve as a 'homework buddy'.
4. If needed, leveraging accommodations from school (e.g. additional time, modified assignments).

9. SEEK OUT INSIGHTS AND SUPPORT FOR YOU.

There are some wonderful resources, recommendations and encouragement from those who have 'been there, done that'. Look online for support groups that are led by and/or include Autistic members -- especially Autistic parents of Autistic students -- these groups can be amazing support and can provide better understanding of what your young person might be experiencing.

10. BE FLEXIBLE AND KIND TO YOU AND YOUR CHILD.

It often takes time to settle in so be prepared for some significant speed bumps. If time is not making the journey easier there are other options for example: a different school, TAFE, Distance Education or home schooling. Value the school's input as well and seek their advice early. The aim is to have a young person who feels safe, accepted and able to learn in their educational environment.

HOME



This tip sheet
accompanies a webinar
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