

WHAT TO EXPECT FRESHMAN YEAR



The hallways are noisy and chaotic. The class schedule is grueling. Ninth grade is the year every grade suddenly counts, the year of the permanent record. Despite the challenges, most kids and their parents manage to make the transition from middle to high school with just a few hiccups. It's a transition that prepares children well for the leap from high school to college and even from college to work life, says Dawn Burnette, a former high school teacher who authored, along with her sophomore students, *High School 101: Freshman Survival Guide*. The book is used at high schools around the country to help kids adjust. Burnette's students wanted to pass along lessons they learned in 9th grade. The student authors tackled the sensitive issue of dealing with upper classmen, advising 9th graders not to announce their freshman status and to initially keep a low profile. They touched on dating, hanging out with friends, and peer pressure. A major message: Learn good organizational skills so you can live a balanced life, with time for schoolwork, friends, family, and activities. "Kids at this age may be starting their first jobs, and they have busy social calendars," Burnette says. "It's a lot to manage."

Choose Courses Wisely

Some students arrive in high school with an unrealistic image portrayed on television. "TV never shows kids learning and studying," Burnette says. Students quickly realize that high school brings choices in what courses you take, and your schedule can determine how much homework you have every night and even which colleges you can go to. Parents, Burnette says, should resist the temptation to push their children into the most difficult courses with the hopes that they'll get admitted to Harvard. "To be in a course that's too difficult just leads to frustration," she says. On the flip side, some students are tempted to take the easiest courses possible in hopes of getting straight A's and a high GPA. That robs the student of a feeling of accomplishment and doesn't fool college admissions officers, who look carefully at course difficulty when evaluating a transcript.

Different Academic Tracks

Most high schools have several paths: a college prep track for students motivated to attend college; an honors track for highly motivated students planning to attend a competitive college; and a career or technical track for students planning an occupation such as auto mechanic, electrician, dental assistant, or computer technician. The goal in 9th grade is to start down the path most likely to be a good fit. But it's possible to switch paths in 10th grade. It's also possible to take some courses in the honors program and others in college prep. Some students in technical programs also take courses in the college prep track. In 9th grade, parents should focus on helping their child figure out the right path while still leaving

time for a social life and family. A counselor will help assemble a schedule that includes the right core courses and electives that match the student's goals. Still, high school can be a pressure cooker, and Burnette's student authors emphasize the importance of personal well-being, including mental and physical health.

Transition for Parents

While students figure out their place in high school, parents have to find their place, as well. Parents tend to visit school less as their kids get older, but parents are needed even more, says Susanne Livingston, a longtime counselor at Eagle's Landing High School in McDonough, Ga. "Be involved," she says. "Go to every meeting that's announced, every open house. Stay in contact with the teachers and work with the teachers." Parents who ask their 9th grader what's going on in school will probably get some variation of this response: "I have it covered." This response, Livingston says, is often a signal that parents need to be involved. They need to know who their child's friends are, who the friends' parents are, and where their child is going. They need to know what their child's grades are and whether homework is getting turned in on time. When kids talk about their social lives, parents may find themselves dragged into the middle of mini soap operas and must be careful not to get sucked into the drama. "When a child comes home and says such and such happened, check it out," she says. "You want to nip it in the bud as soon as possible." Take the same proactive steps with academics. "Going to a teacher on the last day of the semester is a day late and a dollar short," Livingston says. "It's easier to help a child when their struggle is small." Some 9th graders can study independently, but others still need to work at the kitchen table with a parent close by. Some kids have an easy time with studying, while others get overwhelmed and don't know where to start. "I just told a parent today to get flash cards," Livingston says. "They work even in high school." Ninth grade is a time when kids are figuring out what it means to be a teenager. Moms and dads are figuring out what it means to be the parent of a teenager. It may be time to let children make their own choices and experience a little freedom, but 9th grade is also a time for parents to stay close by and be available when they're needed.

Ghezzi, P. (2010). High School, What to Expect in Ninth Grade. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolfamily.com/school-family-articles/article/10668-high-school-what-to-expect-in-ninth-grade>

Additional Reading Resources

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Collegeboard.com (2008). Get it Together for College. New York: The College Board.
Lieberman, Susan. (1997). The Real High School Handbook: How to Survive, Thrive, and Prepare for What's Next. Mariner Books.
Springer, S., Reider, J., & Franck, M. (2009). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.