

Taking the Leap: Helping children with cerebral palsy (CP) transition to high school

A guide for school personnel

The transition from elementary to high school is an important experience in children's lives. It can be a time of new beginnings, new challenges and new friendships, however this transition needs to be managed carefully. While the first few weeks can be challenging, most children adjust within a term or so of starting high school. Educators and allied health professionals can play an integral role in facilitating this transition particularly where the teenager experiences a health condition such as cerebral palsy (CP). This tip sheet aims to assist you in this process and is based on research undertaken with parents and teenagers with CP making this transition in Queensland schools.

"She walks out of those school gates and she walks out in confidence and very happy" (Claire)

What can you do?

- Start preparing early.
- Ensure open communication between school staff, parents and their child.
- Have a positive attitude about including a child with CP. In our experience in most situations children can be included with ease.

"It's much better than I expected, so much better and he's happy and that's the main thing. I think the attitude of the school's a big thing. If they're willing to help then all will go well, but if they don't want it then I think you've got an uphill battle." (Tegan)

"It's really just about okay they (School personnel) really can give you the support and they're willing to educate all their staff" (Cassandra)

Towards the end of Elementary School

- Ensure parents are aware of when their child will need to transition.
- Start planning before the final year of elementary school.
- Make sure the parents know what accommodations you are making to support their child so that this can be communicated to the high school.
- Ensure the child has a way of taking down notes legibly and efficiently. If alternatives are required such as keyboarding, commence training as soon as possible.
- Rather than excusing incomplete work, support the child to find alternatives to ensure all work is completed. This may include giving assignments or homework early, teaching and monitoring the diary use so that parents are informed, and working on alternatives such as typing for faster completion.
- Teach the child to use a diary, to plan their assignments and to organise their books.

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“In elementary school, whenever we had assignments and stuff they always reminded you what it would be like in high school. I also learned to touch type from about Grade 3 so I would get better at typing so it would make it easier for me in high school.” (Beth)

- Extracurricular: As early as possible, start working with the child to find something that they enjoy and can succeed in, be it academic, sporting, drama, photography, etc. Work on building skills in this area from a young age

“I think they should start recognising them more in elementary school so that if they need to be classified and stuff that it can all be done before they hit high school.” (Melissa)

- Social: The social aspect of transition can be one of the most important factors in a teenager’s happiness and success in high school. Social skills training may be needed.

“Yes, probably social coaching maybe because she (her daughter) asked me “mum how do you make friends, what do you do?” ... Like what are you supposed to talk about and stuff?” They’re all feeling the same emotions; they’re all wanting acceptance...from one another. I think that helped Sarah too, in a way, knowing that all other girls are scared too and don’t really know what they’re doing even though they look like they do. That was sort of helpful for her too.” (Susan)

At High School

- Consider how parents and the adolescent will be involved in sharing their history and planning for the transition. Consider if there will be a key point of contact, and how information will be communicated with their other teachers. A regular case conference attached to a staff meeting may be helpful.

“Probably knowing that she was supported by the special needs teacher knowing they had all the systems in place. That was a relief for me and knowing that if I needed to I could contact them easily. If ever there were any issues ... we could easily email them or they’d email us. If there was any problems they’d email us”. (Claire)

“It’s just like home and school are on the same page. Very much so and it’s all very clear and what the expectations are” (Elise)

- Arrange a meeting between the learning support teacher, parents, adolescent and any other pertinent team members during the final semester of the year prior to the adolescent starting at the school.

“Yeah, well it was great actually just to sit down with the principal and the teacher and it was a nice meeting with plenty of time to say what we wanted to say and Sally had her say. It was very positive” (Cassandra)

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- Clarify expectations for participation in physical education lessons. Enabling the adolescent to choose if they feel they are capable of participating and providing an appropriate alternative is recommended.

“She hates doing sports, especially when it’s like volleyball and stuff like that. It’s difficult for her to do those kinds of things. So we’ve just had a discussion and decided to give her an art class instead of sport...” (Susan)

- Some adolescents are participating in sports for people with a disability at a very high level and are grateful for the opportunity to receive specialist sports training.

“...whether they’re making enough of his ability as an athlete with a disability. I need to sort of have another talk with them...and what I mean by that is not just that he gets selected or nominated but they actually train them, you know teach them how to throw discus and give them some experience with competing and running and things like that. I don’t think there’s enough of that being done.” (Gail)

- Consider the options for extracurricular participation available, such as sports, drama, debating or community programs.

“I think the biggest thing that all the kids need is they’ve got to have some kind of skill that gives them confidence, particularly for kids that are in the intellectually normal range because they’re really aware of what’s going on with their peers.” (Erin)

- Check that the adolescent can access the evacuation area in case of fire or an emergency. Alternative plans may need to be made.
- Determine how the adolescent can access all areas of the school safely. They may require extra time to get between classes. Many adolescents prefer not to use an elevator so that they can be the same as their peers, however they are often grateful for the option. They may need a different way of carrying their books between classes.

“Carrying the books and the distances she will have to travel going from class to class. You know, whether she’ll be really fatigued at the end of the day. I think that will be a big thing because a lot of people don’t realise that it takes Alice – Alice has to put a lot more effort into doing just normal things, like walking to a class or something like that than ordinary children and she does get fatigued.” (Julia)

- Consider how support can be offered to the adolescent in a way that is subtle and readily available.
- Determine how the school can work to engender an attitude of support and acceptance of diversity among your students and staff.

“...talking about different kids have different needs and we all struggle with certain things and some of the kids need help with getting along with others and Luke’s cerebral palsy. It’s just been another little difficulty that anyone could have and they haven’t really made a huge deal of it. It’s just something that we all need support and a little bit of encouragement goes a long way and trying to engender that spirit of group support. Those sorts of things are what they’re trying to do, so that’s good.” (Elise)

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- Recognise and reward small achievements as would be done for other students, such as an award for improved grades at the end of semester.

“The rewards are there, if you do a little bit of a, you know you put in a bit of effort, you do a little bit of extra work, it pays off and you get rewarded for it. So there is a lot of schools that don’t recognise those little things along the way and that spurred him on to think well I can do this and okay it’s a bit hard, but if I put in a bit of extra effort then I will get rewarded for it.” (Elise)

- Consider allowing access to the timetable in advance, or teaching the adolescent to read it on the first day. Colour coding the timetable to match their books, and having several copies may assist.
- The location of the locker somewhere central and easily accessible, where the adolescent can easily retrieve books is important. Ensure the adolescent can open the combination lock quickly. You can send it home for practice in advance or provide an alternative. If no locker is available, ensure that the adolescent can safely and easily carry their books between classes. Some adolescents find it helps to have a folder, ziplock bag or something similar for each subject, so that they can quickly pick it up and know that they have all the items needed for that subject.
- There are many simple adaptations that are likely to be required and can make a significant difference to the success of the adolescent in participating in the curriculum. It is important to speak with the parents and adolescent about these well in advance. For example:
 - Adjusting a music piece to require the use of one hand only
 - Altering the equipment used in home economics or technology, or allowing the students to work in pairs
 - Providing extra time for exams, homework or assignments
 - Using alternative equipment for rulers, calculators, protractors, compasses, etc
 - Providing a larger space for writing down homework, or having a peer write it for them
 - Providing printed handouts to highlight key points
 - Allowing extra time to change before and after physical education lessons, and/or allowing adjustments to the gym uniform, such as using Velcro instead of buttons and putting elastic laces on shoes

“His clothing, I’ve had the buttons changed from buttons to tabs. His elastic laces on his shoes and they’ve allowed him to not get changed, or time in between classes, if there’s sport on.” (Tegan)

- Structured guidelines as to the uniform requirements and behaviour expectations are important. Understanding what the adolescent is capable of and supporting them to reach their potential is appreciated by parents and adolescents themselves.

“They would understand him but also I’m hoping that they do push them, so they don’t just think that’s the level he is, I do hope they push him more. The guidelines for the uniforms and all that sort of stuff as well, I think, and that’s going to be the best education for him so that he doesn’t get overwhelmed.” (Melissa)

- Be prepared to accommodate for increased fatigue due to physical effort.

Preparation and ongoing communication are the key!

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