

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

A guide for parents of adolescents with CP

The transition from elementary to high school is an important experience in your child's school life. It can be a time of new beginnings, new challenges and new friendships, however this transition needs to be managed carefully. Keep it positive! While the first few weeks can be challenging, most children adjust within a term or so of starting high school. Parents have shared their perspectives on this transition with us. Here we share their advice to assist you in planning for your child's transition to high school.

"I think it actually turned out better than we could have anticipated." (Gail)

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

What can you do? Parents in our study suggested

- Start preparing early
- Keep lines of communication open between you, your child, your child's elementary school and their new high school
- Know your rights
- Become familiar with the school's policy on accommodations for students with special needs
- Have a positive attitude

"It's much better than I expected, so much better and he's happy and that's the main thing." (Tegan)

Deciding which school to go to - Things to consider

- What are the values of the school?
- What is the size of the school?
- Will your child be able to find his/her way around easily, to fit in and to be supported by their teachers?
- How will your child get to that school?
- Can your child get around the school easily?
- What support is available and how will your child access it? Does the school specialise in support for a particular type of disability, and will a stigma be attached?
- What are the school board's policies and procedures related to inclusion and bullying?

Authors: Fiona Jones, Sylvia Rodger, Jenny Ziviani and Roslyn Boyd

“Look you’re always very anxious because it’s the fact that they have the disability as well as starting high school... and how the other kids would cope with him also, is more important.” (Tegan)

- How willing is the school to hear what you have to say and to accommodate this?
- Will the school understand your child’s needs but push them to reach their potential?
- Will your child have friends attending that school?

“I think in these bigger schools as in for friends and hanging around the right people and everything like that. I think he would get a bit lost and he’d get, he’d get led astray.” (Melissa)

- What extracurricular opportunities are available to your child?
- What are the expectations of the school around uniform, academic achievement, participation and social integration?

“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)

Early planning

- Know what year your child needs to start high school and start planning a few years in advance.
- Visit the school for open days, and more often if possible. You might like to try:
 - Walking between classrooms within 3–5 minutes
 - Finding each classroom
 - Taking photos to make your own map of the school
- Have a clear indication of your child’s academic, social and sporting abilities. Figure out what level of support will be required so that your child is able to keep up.
- Work with your child to develop a means of taking down notes quickly, legibly and comfortably to ensure that they are able to write down assignments and test answers within the time frame allowed. Perhaps early training on keyboarding skills is required.
- Practice using a diary and planning assignments.
- Transport: Work out how your child will be getting to and from school. If they will be using public transport, start teaching them early how to read the timetables, pay, get on and off at the right stop and manage if things go wrong. You might like to do several practice runs over the holidays before starting school.

“It’s not as simple as just getting from A to B. It’s knowing what you have to pack and making sure that he was able to carry that as well as walk the distance that he needed to go and just making sure that everything was packed.” (Elise)

- Extracurricular: As early as possible, start working with your 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.

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“If you look at able bodied kids, they do sport, they do art, they do dance, they do drama class, they do this, they do that, they get good at something. So by the time they’ve hit high school, most of the kids have got three or four years of some kind of skill building behind them in one area whether it’s netball or something.” (Erin)

- Social: The social aspect of transition can be one of the most important factors in your child’s happiness in high school. Engaging with other children outside of school, such as in extra curricular activities or with cousins, may assist. Other parents have found that supporting the use of socially appropriate technology, such as MSN, can help the child feel more confident.

“She was a bit nervous to start with because her main concern was she wasn’t going to make any friends because all of her life experience at school she’s never been able to get friends, they just seem to not even though she’s friendly to them they don’t seem to like her because she can’t play active games they like to, so they’ve got to sort of sit and talk. A lot of them don’t like to sit and talk, they like to play. But now at her age that’s what they like to do is sit and talk. That worked out well, so she was really happy.” (Susan)

Before you start

- Joining a club or recreational activity, such as a sporting camp, at the school prior to starting high school may help your child to make friends in a more relaxed environment
- Arrange a meeting with school officials the year before your child transitions. It can be beneficial to involve your child in this meeting, as they will be expected to take on some independence in self advocacy at their high school. You may wish to discuss:
 - Their Individual Education Plan
 - Who your child should go to if they need assistance
 - Their eligibility for an education assistant
 - How information will be shared with your child’s new teachers? Will there be a key point of contact, and how will they communicate with their teachers?
 - Physical education lessons: Will your child participate in PE lessons? Will accommodations be needed? What will your child do if they cannot participate? Who decides if your child can participate in an activity or not?
 - Evacuation plans: Can your child access the evacuation area easily in case of an emergency? Do alternate plans need to be put in place?
 - Can your child access all areas of the school safely?
 - When using the stairs, can your child carry their books, adjust to being bumped and climb the stairs quickly? Do they need a different way of carrying their books?
 - How will your child be supported? How can this be done so that they are not embarrassed, and it is not obvious to others?
 - How will the school engender an attitude of support and acceptance of diversity among their 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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- Timetables:
 - Can you access the timetable in advance?
 - How will the child know what class they need to go to?
 - Can you colour code the timetable/change the size/reduce the information on it?
 - Could you match the colour of their textbook cover to match the colour of the subject on their timetable?
 - Where will you place it? For example, you might like to keep a copy in their room, on the fridge, in their diary and in their locker.
- Lockers:
 - Will there be a locker? If not, how will your child carry their books around during the day?
 - Can your child open their combination lock quickly? It may be helpful to access this in advance and practice, or to consider an alternative.
 - Will the locker be placed near your child's classroom? Is it placed somewhere that will be easy for them to reach and move books in and out of?
 - Some children find it helps to have a folder, ziplock bag or similar for each subject, so that they can quickly pick it up and know that they have all the items needed for that subject.

“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)

- Adaptations: These are some suggestions of adaptations that might aid your child, however this should be discussed in light of your child's strengths and areas of challenge
 - If your child has hemiplegia, will they be able to use the equipment in home economics, technology or music? Can they have the music piece adjusted to be played with one hand only?
 - Does your child need extra time for exams, homework or assignments?
 - Will they be able to use the calculator, protractor, ruler, compass, etc?
 - Can they write down information in their diary easily?
- Uniform: Can your child get in and out of his/her uniform quickly and easily? Do they need longer to change between class time and sport lessons? Do they need their tie put on elastic? Could you put elastic through their shoelaces eyelets instead of laces?

“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)

- Talk openly with your child about their expectations of high school, and try to help them shape realistic expectations. You might like to have an action plan of how they can handle different issues if they arise, such as bullying, falling behind with schoolwork, getting lost or not having someone to sit with at lunch.

“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 and if you are not willing to play the game and live by those rules, then don’t bother coming, it is as simple as that.” (Elise)

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Starting high school

- Try to organise to meet with that friend on the first day.

“Socially I think he’s made some friends. Being part of a cricket team has been good for him. He actually said to me at the end of last week, he said, mum, on Monday [first day of cricket camp] I really didn’t know anybody and didn’t have anyone to talk to but, he said, now I’ve got 20 odd friends.” (Elise)

- Be prepared for fatigue at the end of the day, the week and the term.
- Work hard to keep open communication, and know that the parent role is likely to change with your child becoming more independent.

“I don’t think she was that concerned. I think she was a bit excited. I was probably more concerned than she was. I was fairly involved with the elementary schooling and the biggest difference – I had other parents saying to me when you get to high school you stop at the front gate. You don’t go into the school so being out of – involved in the school has dropped right off so it’s a bigger shock for me.” (Claire)

Preparation and ongoing communication are the key!

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