

The Medical Minute: Back-to-school transitions for teens

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Credit: Annemarie Mountz

Preparing to ace subjects such as time management, independence and identity can drive high school and college students—not to mention their parents—to weeks of worry and anxiety as summer melts into September.

Michael J. Murray, associate professor of psychiatry at Penn State Hershey, says there are steps both parents and [teens](#) can take to smooth the transition.

Parents of children moving from middle to high school need to remember that interaction with friends will be less about play and [recreational activities](#) and more focused on social communication and personal expression. As teens network with peers and navigate different social groups, they may feel isolated and alone.

"It's important to help them understand that is typical and normal," Murray said. "They might say they are the only one not fitting in, but you need to remind them that everyone struggles with it."

Parents can help by having conversations with their teens about what values and beliefs are important to them and how to make choices for themselves rather than compromising to fit in. New [high school students](#) may find that academic demands increase as much as the social pressures. Less daily homework and more long-term projects demand good time management skills.

Then there are deadlines involved with the college search and application process, as well as the hunt for scholarships and financial aid if [students](#) plan to continue on to college.

Murray says parents can help teens stay on top of it all without sounding like a nag by setting up a schedule for weekly check-ins.

"Have a time that you sit down together and talk about what is coming up and what needs to get done," he said. "That way it is a regular, set conversation rather than something random – it's just part of what you do."

College freshmen may no longer have that kind of parental scaffolding, so it is important they connect with academic supports available on campus—and continue to engage with them for at least one full semester.

"One of the things I see happen sometimes is that students use those services at the start, then they feel like they've got it and disengage," Murray said. "But the start of the semester feels very different than the end of the semester when you have papers and final exams."

He encourages freshmen to participate in orientation activities that provide an opportunity for new students to find ways to integrate themselves into the campus community. "It is an opportunity to try something new," Murray said.

Parents and teens should also set expectations about when and how they will communicate and how often the student will come home. "Whether it's a weekly call, a daily text or twice a week video chats, it's important to send that message of support—that they can reach out to you at any time," Murray said.

At the same time, he cautions parents about becoming overly involved or intrusive, which can be counterproductive. Instead, focus on preparing teens to navigate college challenges on their own. That could include anything from teaching them how to do laundry and prepare their own meals to ways they can establish a healthy and balanced schedule or handle a difficult roommate.

Whether it's the first go-round on campus or a return for a new semester, Murray suggests students and parents check out collegeparents.org to find checklists and strategies to help with the transition.

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identity can drive high school and [college students](#)—not to mention their parents—to weeks of worry and anxiety as summer melts into September.

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Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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