



Institiúid na gComhairleoirí Treorach  
INSTITUTE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS

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## The Transition To Secondary School

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**Sharing Experiences Of  
Those Who Have Gone  
Before You**

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**The Institute of  
Guidance Counsellors**

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**The Transition To Secondary School**  
**Sharing Ideas & Experiences Of Those Who Have Gone Before You, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition**  
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## 1. Introduction

As your child moves from primary to secondary school he/she faces into a period of great change and transition. Your child is moving from a place where he/she is the tallest, oldest, and most senior student to a place where he/she is the smallest, youngest and most junior. He/she has moved from a building with one very familiar classroom to a new building with dozens of different classrooms and where he/she will have to move from a Maths room to a computer lab, and from a science room to a P.E. hall.

Throughout the last year of primary school he/she has had one main teacher who was very familiar with each child and with whose personality your child became familiar and accustomed. Your child will now have to deal with possibly 8 different teachers each day. Indeed, if your son/daughter has a particular subject for three 40/45-minute periods each week, it will take until November for the teacher-pupil contact time to equal one week in primary school. Moreover, in primary school the teacher only had to be familiar with about 30 students; in secondary school each teacher may have to be familiar with in excess of 200 students. Indeed, as the pupil-teacher relationship is a two-way process it will take time for each teacher to become familiar with the personality of each student and each student to become used to the different personalities of all his/her teachers.

In 6<sup>th</sup> class your child was surrounded by about 30 students he/she knew well and who, in turn, knew them well. He/she will now be faced with a situation where they are mixing with a much larger number of different students in their year group, some of whom he/she does not know and who also do not know them. As our relationships with those around us is one of the main factors that determine how comfortable we feel, it is these factors, in addition to organisational matters, that will determine how long it will take for your child to find a sense of comfort, familiarity, and attachment in their new surroundings.

In primary school all your child's school equipment and books were easy to obtain and produce when needed. In secondary school he/she will have to get use to organising their locker, sorting books and copies for the early morning classes, mid-morning classes, and afternoon classes. He/she will have to get use to organising different books for different days and ensuring homework that is given for the next day is done and homework that is given, for example on Monday and not due until Thursday, is done on time. In addition, academically, your child will now encounter new subjects he/she has not encountered before and probably get used to not scoring well in all tests all of the time.

## 2. The Timetable

One of the most confusing aspects of 1<sup>st</sup> year is the weekly timetable. Your child will be given a copy of their timetable and taken through its various aspects. When your child comes home with this timetable you might encourage them to explain it to you (rather than you explaining it to them – although you can fill in the gaps). You should encourage your child to (i) transfer a copy into their homework diary<sup>1</sup>, (ii) place a copy on the inside of their locker door<sup>2</sup>, and (iii) place a copy on the wall beside the desk at home where they do their homework<sup>3</sup>. Students will be anxious to try and know all the information contained in the timetable all at once. The school timetable may contain some or all of the following information. The times of each subject on different days, the venue/room in which the classes takes place, and the initials/names of the relevant teachers. Your child will want to try and learn the times of each subject, each teacher's name, and the location of each classroom not just for one day but all five days. This is an overwhelming and impossible task.

Therefore it might be necessary for you to reassure your child that they do not have to know all the details at once. Reassure them that they will learn the teachers' names over time – after all it will take even longer for the teacher to know all the students names. Remind them that they can look at a copy of their timetable in their homework dairy at the end of each class to remind them what subject they have next. If students have to move to different rooms for each subject, reassure your child that all other students are faced with this dilemma, and that initially, it might be sufficient just to remember what corridor the classroom is located, and remind them that they can simply follow other students. Once he/she finds the correct corridor, it will be relatively easy to find the correct classroom. It is interesting to note what previous 1<sup>st</sup> years have said regarding this matter, *"After one full week I knew where I was going and where I should be"*<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A Quote from Student I – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>2</sup> A Quote from Student II – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>3</sup> A Quote from Parent I – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>4</sup> A Quote from Student III – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

### 3. Homework

With regard to homework, you should reinforce what each teacher will do, i.e. encourage your child to write into their homework diary what homework has been given that day. It might be a useful conversation for you to ask them to show and explain to you what homework has been given each day. It is an extremely good habit for your child to do their homework soon after they arrive home. If the homework is left late into the evening it is a dangerous habit that can have an extremely detrimental effect later on in 1<sup>st</sup> year and indeed for the next 5/6 years. While they will still let you, it might be useful to ask your child about the content of the homework for each subject, especially the new subjects. It may transpire that they did not quite grasp the instructions given to them by the teacher. You may need to encourage them to ask the teacher the next time this happens. It is a necessary and vital skill for *them* to develop. With some subjects homework will be given on Monday and will have to be handed in on Thursday. It is a very poor habit to develop for your child to leave this homework until Wednesday night. They need to be encouraged to do this homework the night it is given<sup>5</sup>. It is useful to note what the experts – the students themselves – say about the influence of parental involvement with homework.

- *“My Mum checks my homework and sometimes gives me extra questions “.*<sup>6</sup>
- *“My Dad tests me after I have done my homework”.*<sup>7</sup>
- *“I am let watch T.V. only after all my work is done”.*<sup>8</sup>
- *“I always have to do my homework immediately when I come home, and I always do my homework on Friday and never leaving it until the weekend”.*<sup>9</sup>
- *“I am not let use the computer until I have done all my homework”.*<sup>10</sup>

Those students who struggle to achieve their potential stated the following.

- *“I leave my homework until around 8.00 p.m. after I have relaxed, watched T.V., and checked Facebook. I leave my homework until Sunday evening”.*<sup>11</sup>
- *“My parents don’t check my homework”.*<sup>12</sup>
- *“I am allowed one hour on the computer before I do my homework”.*<sup>13</sup>
- *“I go to bed around 11.00 p.m. after I have watched X”.*<sup>14</sup>
- *“When I go to bed at 10 p.m. before I go to sleep, I spend an hour or so on my i-pad”.*<sup>15</sup>
- *“Before I go home, I hang around town until 5/6 p.m. Then I go home”.*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A Quote from Parent III – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>6</sup> A Quote from Student IV – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>7</sup> A Quote from Student V – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>8</sup> A Quote from Student VI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>9</sup> A Quote from Student VII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>10</sup> A Quote from Student VIII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>11</sup> A Quote from Student IX – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>12</sup> A Quote from Student X – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>13</sup> A Quote from Student XI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>14</sup> A Quote from Student XII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>15</sup> A Quote from Student XIII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

## 4. Getting Organised

### 4.1 Books and Copies

One of the many worries 1<sup>st</sup> year students have is the fear of not being organised.<sup>17</sup> Different books need to be organised for different days. Rather than you performing this task, you might let your child show you how they can organise this activity, which, in turn, allows you to check it has been done correctly.

Sometimes mistakes can be made when a student does not relate the title of a book to a specific subject. For example, they may not recognise the French or German title on a book as being the book related to that language. In addition, the History or Geography book may not actually have the subject name in its title. This can be overcome by placing a sticker with the subject name on the front or spine of the book.<sup>18</sup> To help coordinate the correct copy with the correct textbook some students place the relevant copy inside each of the relevant textbooks.<sup>19</sup>

Your child may not wish to carry all their books for every class on a given day in their school bag, indeed, this may not be practical. Instead, before the first class, it might be useful to place the books required for the first few classes up until the mid-morning break in their bag and the remainder in their locker. At morning break they can then retrieve the books for the next few classes up until lunch break, and at lunchtime retrieve the books for the last few classes. Indeed, this system can be helped if, first thing in the morning having placed the books and copies for the first few class in their bag, the books and copies for the classes for mid-morning to lunch break are sorted and placed together in their locker and the books and copies required from lunch to the end of the day are sorted and placed in a separate part of their locker.<sup>20</sup> This system can also be enhanced by stacking their books with the labelled spine facing outwards so that they can be easily retrieved.<sup>21</sup>

It is a good habit to encourage your child to get all their books, copies, and any other equipment ready for the next day just after they have finished their homework the evening before. To quote one 1<sup>st</sup> year student, *“my parents insist I get all my stuff ready for the next day. Immediately after I have finished my work I have to put my bag and gear at the front door ready for the morning.”*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> A Quote from Student XV – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>17</sup> A Quote from Student XV – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>18</sup> A Quote from Parent III – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>19</sup> A Quote from Student XVI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>20</sup> A Quote from Student XVII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>21</sup> A Quote from Student XVIII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>22</sup> A Quote from Student XIX – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

## 4.2 i-pads

If your teenager is using an i-pad instead of books, the organisational issues mentioned above are still relevant with copies and other equipment needed for class.

The use of electronic devices instead of books has its advantages. i-pads can allow access to a greater volume of information using the internet. In addition, these devices allow for the information to be displayed in graphic or moving image format which books do not allow. However, there are disadvantages and these need to be minimised.

- Has the i-pad a protective cover and has the screen a protective transparent film?
- Is the owners name on it?
- Can it be disabled to prevent games being downloaded?
- Can it be disabled to prevent access to adult material?

Remember, electronic devices only improve the way information is accessed and displayed. Because of the improved access and display students think less learning is required. The same amount of time learning, practicing, and studying still needs to be done to acquire knowledge and skills. i-pads replacing books does not mean less work needs to be done.

## 4.3 Recording Presence in School

Some schools operate a manual system carried out by school staff to record the presence of students. Other schools operate some form of electronic recording that requires the students to record their attendance for each school day. If your school operates such a system it will be necessary for your child to familiarise themselves with the procedure and to establish their own habits to conform to the school recording system. If your school has some form of swiping in system, previous 1<sup>st</sup> years recommend getting into a routine that reminds them to swipe in. This might be (i) swiping in before going to the locker,<sup>23</sup> (ii) swiping in immediately after they have organised their locker,<sup>24</sup> (iii) leaving their swipe card in view so that it is the first thing the student sees when they open the locker door.<sup>25</sup> Also, some students carry their swipe card in their wallet,<sup>26</sup> while others attach it to their keys.<sup>27</sup>

## 4.4 Late & Absence

Schools are obliged to record students who are late and absent. Different schools operate different systems. It will be necessary for both parent and student to familiarise themselves with the procedure. If a student is absent, schools will require a written note from the parent when the student returns. Some schools have homework dairies which contain a section that provides for absent/late note that can be filled in by parents.

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<sup>23</sup> A Quote from Student XX – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>24</sup> A Quote from Student XXI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>25</sup> A Quote from Student XXII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>26</sup> A Quote from Student XXIII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>27</sup> A Quote from Student XXIV – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

## 5. School Rules

A copy of the school rules may be printed in your child's homework diary or may be distributed via other school literature. It would be very useful for both you and your child to read these rules together. When doing so, your child might come across rules that he/she finds silly, or does not agree with. At this point you might introduce the idea of the need for a school to have rules to encourage *collective* discipline as opposed to *individual* discipline and that these rules are for the common good. After all, as adults we encounter rules imposed on us by society or in the work place that we must adhere to, despite us not agreeing with them.

## 6. Lost Property

It is important that your child stores all their books, equipment, sports gear, and jacket in their locker. In addition, it is very helpful if their name is on all copies and books and, where possible, on each piece of uniform and sports gear. In a changing room with 30 first year students, it is quite common for students to (i) change into P.E. gear that belongs to the student changing next to them,<sup>28</sup> or (ii) to redress using bits of other students uniform.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, it is particularly important to have all pieces of uniform and sports gear tagged with a name. If something does go astray, *they* should approach their teacher who will advise them. Again, letting *them* do this for themselves is a learning opportunity that could be missed if a parent carries out this duty.

## 7. Extra-Curricular Activities

Extra-curricular activities, including sport and the arts, are very important in a holistic education. There is so much more to a good education than going to class. The student who only comes to class misses so much.

So, all students should, as far as possible, become involved in the extra-curricular and cultural life of their school. Schools will offer a variety of extra-curricular activities – sport, music, scouting, debating, social justice activities etc. Your child should avail of these opportunities for their own intrinsic value in learning life skills as well as using them to establish new friendships or strengthen existing ones. Indeed, it is extra-curricular activities that help students form life-long friendships.

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<sup>28</sup> A Quote from Student XXV – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>29</sup> A Quote from Student XXVI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.



## 8. Making New Friends

Generally speaking, students starting secondary school either, (i) do not know any of the other students, or (ii) have already established friendships with those they will be starting secondary school. For those in the former category, starting secondary school can be a daunting prospect. It is worth reminding them that they are not the only ones in this situation. If your son or daughter is one of those in the latter group, you might encourage them to introduce themselves to those who may not know anyone else and suggest they say hello and greet these students.<sup>30</sup> Also, with this in mind, if it is convenient, you might consider giving one of the new students a lift home from school or training<sup>31</sup> or urging your child to invite them to your home.<sup>32</sup>

However, if your child is one of the students who knows nobody else, it is important to point out that the onus should not be left to the other students only.<sup>33</sup> Students who have travelled this journey before recommend that new students should also approach others to introduce themselves.<sup>34</sup> Initially, this is easier if it is first done with those who they might be sitting beside in class,<sup>35</sup> or with a group of 2/3 students in the corridor.<sup>36</sup> Other students have recommended (i) *“Ask can you play in the football game at lunch time,”*<sup>37</sup> (ii) *“ask is this a place free at the canteen table”*.<sup>38</sup> All previous new students stated that playing a sport always helps with integration.<sup>39</sup> However, integration was really pronounced when students mixed with each other outside school activities, e.g. going to each other’s house or going to the cinema.<sup>40</sup> While this may be daunting for some – it is also a necessary life skill.

Even if your child already has these established friendship before entering secondary school, it is normal – and will happen with most first years groups - for students to alter their circle of friends during 1<sup>st</sup> year<sup>41</sup> and indeed into 2<sup>nd</sup> year.<sup>42</sup> While it is very tempting and understandable for your child to stay within the comfort zone of established relationships, it can be argued that parents should encourage their children to take the opportunity to form and create new friends within their class group and within the wider year group. This is a healthy experience and a worthwhile skill to learn.

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<sup>30</sup> A Quote from Student XXVII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>31</sup> A Quote from Student XXVIII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>32</sup> A Quote from Student XXIX – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>33</sup> A Quote from Student XXX – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>34</sup> A Quote from Student XXXI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>35</sup> A Quote from Student XXXII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>36</sup> A Quote from Student XXXIII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>37</sup> A Quote from Student XXXIV – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>38</sup> A Quote from Student XXXV – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>39</sup> A Quote from Student XXXVI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>40</sup> A Quote from Student XXXVII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>41</sup> A Quote from Parent IV – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>42</sup> A Quote from Parent V – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

During 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year teenagers can be seen to 'try out' new friends. They may expand or move from the circle of friends they had in primary school or the friends they made at the beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> year. This is perfectly natural and normal particularly if the new friends share the same interests and values. However, some teenagers can be heard to say they want to be in the '*cool gang*.' It is interesting to examine what lies behind their perception of what constitutes the '*cool gang*'. For some, the '*cool gang*' are often those who are further along the journey of pubescent development. For boys this might mean those that are taller, or have started to grow body hair, or have a more athletic physic. For girls it might mean those who have more attractive hair or body shape.

For both genders it might also mean those who are outwardly more confident, more advanced in their chosen sport, or more advanced academically, or are more confident in talking to the opposite sex, or are simply viewed as better looking.

Given that adults often envy such characteristics in other adults, it is understandable that teenagers will engage in the same comparisons. As stated earlier, teenagers move or expand their circle of friends to other teenagers because they have found new individuals with the same interest and values. However, some teenagers try to join the '*cool gang*' for the more superficial reason outlined above and if these attempts fail, it can cause upset. If this is the case, it is worth remembering the following. If your son or daughter is in a group of friends that seek out and enjoy their company and value them for who they are - they are already in the '*cool gang*'.

## 9. The Feelings

During this transition period into secondary school your child will meet new adults, new peers, and encounter a new environment, as well as experiencing a myriad of feelings. He/she may be anxious, worried, nervous, apprehensive, tense, restless, uneasy, fretful and even stressed. These feelings may be compounded by feeling embarrassed about not having the right equipment, not understanding what is being taught, or simply by not seeing him/herself as the same as their peers. They may even exhibit signs of insecurity, childish behaviour, or even shed a tear or two.

Here are some worries expressed by previous students.

- *"I worried I won't have friends in my class".*<sup>43</sup>
- *"I worried my old friends will act differently".*<sup>44</sup>
- *"I worried because everybody else will be bigger".*<sup>45</sup>
- *"I worried I will be crushed".*<sup>46</sup>
- *"I worried about being organised".*<sup>47</sup>
- *"I worried about being late for class".*<sup>48</sup>
- *"I worried about finding my way around".*<sup>49</sup>
- *"I worried about teachers being too strict".*<sup>50</sup>
- *"I worried about new subjects".*<sup>51</sup>

[Students made these observations at Easter time in 1<sup>st</sup> year; when having the discussion with them, they all laughed at how silly they felt they were]. What can you do?

As well as the practical steps outlined above, it is important that their anxieties are not fuelled, or added to, by the worries or concerns of parents. While it is perfectly natural for parents to try and reassure their child, relying solely on reassurance can be detrimental. If you *only* provide reassurance to your child that everything will be all right, it could have a number of unintentional consequences. He/she may perceive that their feelings of anxiety are wrong and, as a result, that there must be something wrong with them for feeling the way they do. They may then assume that they are the only one feeling this way and attempt to ignore or suppress such feelings.

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<sup>43</sup> A Quote from Student XXXVIII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>44</sup> A Quote from Student XXXIX – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>45</sup> A Quote from Student XL – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>46</sup> A Quote from Student XLI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>47</sup> A Quote from Student XLII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>48</sup> A Quote from Student XLIII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>49</sup> A Quote from Student XLIV – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>50</sup> A Quote from Student XLV – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>51</sup> A Quote from Student XLVI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

Therefore, in order to avoid such unintentional consequences, it is suggested that *before* you provide reassurance, your child's feelings and emotions need to be verbalised by them and then acknowledged by you. This can be accomplished by letting them tell you, without interruption, how they feel and then for these feelings to be listened to and understood by you and then acknowledged by you. No matter how unrealistic or exaggerated or childish these feelings may seem they are real for them. (Remember your responses to "that monster under the bed" when they were four). The basis for such a conversation lies in the ability to recognise emotions in your child i.e. "*empathy*." Empathy can be defined as:

A continuing process whereby [one person] lays aside his own way of experiencing and perceiving reality, preferring to sense and respond to the experiences and perceptions of the [other person].<sup>52</sup>

Once you feel you have understood your child's perception of the world they now find themselves in, it is now necessary to acknowledge these feelings and for them to perceive such acknowledgement. This can be achieved by reflecting back to them what they have said by using, if necessary, the same words they have used. As well as using the appropriate words, it is also important to mirror the emotions and feelings behind the words used. Paraphrasing and reframing what they have expressed are other techniques that can be used. These techniques should be used without adding to, or decreasing, the emotional feeling expressed by them. Reflecting back means that you accept how they feel. It does not include your evaluation or casting judgment on their feelings. This may be more appropriate and necessary at later time. Acceptance of their feelings is everything.

In summary, ask open questions – this means questions that don't have a 'yes' or 'no' answer, questions that start with 'how', 'when', 'what', 'who', 'why'.

1. Summarise – Summarise what you have understood: "*So, you're feeling you are the only one?*".
2. Reflect – Just repeating a word or phrase can encourage them to carry on talking: "*Yes, it's difficult*".
3. Clarify – Ask more details: "*Tell me more about that*", "*How exactly did you feel?*"
4. Give words of encouragement: "*Go on*", "*Ah I see*".
5. Leave open moments – Don't feel you have to fill the silence. Staying quiet while keeping your attention on them can encourage them to say something else.
6. React – Show that you've understood how they are feeling: "*That's really hard*". "*It must be very difficult to cope with that*".
7. Use non-verbal encouragement – Smiling, responding to the feelings they show with facial expressions or mirroring their facial expressions and keeping eye contact to show they have your full attention.

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<sup>52</sup> Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne, *Person-Centred Counselling In Action*, (London: Sage Publications Ltd. 1995) p 39.

A parallel can be drawn when a loved one or a friend passes away. We would never dream of reassuring the grieving person that everything will be all right and that they will get over their loss. Instead, it is our natural instinct to listen to how that person feels and acknowledge and help them deal with such feelings. Therefore, once (i) your child has expressed how they feel, (ii) you have understood how they feel by establishing empathy, (iii) and reflected back to them such feelings, then it may now be appropriate to implement any practical steps necessary and provide that instinctive reassurance.

## **10. Occasional Disciplinary Issues**

From time to time most students will encounter the odd disciplinary problem. Such incidents, which, for the vast majority of students are either non-remarkable or rare, can occur between pupil and teacher or pupil and pupil. Because of the occasional nature of such incidences, both parties deal with the situation in such a way that each participant learns from the experience and their subsequent relationship grows and is enriched. In our personal lives we all have had the experience of relationships that have been strengthened by having disagreements and then working through these disagreements in a constructive matter. Therefore, it can be argued, that when your child encounters such difficulties it is normal and healthy, and indeed a vital life skill in order for growth to occur. Experience shows that as time passes, the original incident or mistake tends to be forgotten and what is remembered is how the mistake was fixed. It is a useful adage to teach a young person that *“the mark of any person is not the mistakes they make, but how they fix such mistakes.”*

## 11. Long-term Discipline Issues

There are some students who, when they exhibit disciplinary problems in 1<sup>st</sup> year also show signs that would indicate that such problems may continue for a number of years or indeed up until 6<sup>th</sup> year and possibly beyond.

While it is true to say that schools/teachers are never right 100% of the time about all students, it is also true to say that schools/teachers are never wrong 100% of the time with the same student. Given this, it is interesting to note the characteristics of the students that exhibit signs and systems that might indicate the beginnings of long-term disciplinary issues.

- a) One obvious situation occurs when a student acts out over a long period of time as a result of a deep-seated emotional issue that is preventing the student from enjoying what should be an exciting time in their development. Such emotional issues can arise from any number of issues. These may include a difficulty with a relationship with an important figure in the student's life, be that one or both parents or a sibling, or some other significant person or, indeed, their peers.<sup>53</sup> Other emotional difficulties may arise from bullying or a learning difficulty or not fitting into an academic environment. These issues may exhibit themselves through various forms, for example, an unhealthy relationship with food, anxiety, becoming socially withdrawn, or seeking attention (above the norm) from peers or teachers, or misbehaving in school.
- b) Some students may have a poor self-image. This negative self-image can have a detrimental effect. One such effect is for that student to *act out* in such a way that will allow themselves to feel good about self and/or to gain favour with their peers. These peers may have a similar view of the world and, as a result, the thinking and bonds become reinforced<sup>54</sup> within the group.
- c) Some parents believe that to create a confident, creative, independent child it is necessary to grant them the freedom and independence that others might feel is more appropriate to those in the latter stages of the teenage years. It is therefore quite understandable that such a student would expect that the autonomy created at home to be replicated in school. Such a divergence in ground rules between the home and school can result in prolonged disciplinary difficulties.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Anita Woolfolk, *Education Psychology*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2007) p 74.

<sup>54</sup> Linda Nielsen, *Adolescence*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (California: Thomson-Wadsworth, 1996) p 154.

<sup>55</sup> John W. Santrock, *Educational Psychology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004) p 75.

- d) In modern times it is now very common for both parents to be working fulltime. Traditionalists too easily jump to the conclusion that if both parents are working fulltime it can have a detrimental effect on their child's development resulting in disciplinary issues. However, this is disingenuous to say the least, because the vast majority of students from homes where both parents work are not disadvantaged in any psychological, cognitive, or emotional way. These students are normal healthy individuals with no such long-term disciplinary problems. However, there is a phenomenon that does exist with a tiny minority of families where both parents work. As stated above, this has nothing to do with the absence of a parent, but rather reflects on the quality rather than the quantity of the time parents spends with their child. The quality of such time spent together may not be sufficient to establish that deep emotional bond with both parents that each child needs. This unintentional lack of attachment that is established within the child can cause long-term disciplinary issues regardless of the amount of time spent with parents.<sup>56</sup> This issue does not exclusively occur in homes where both parents work.
- e) Some parents opt for a parenting style that relies mainly on a relationship based only on positive interactions. These parents feel that to confront or object to their child's behaviour may in some way indicate that their relationship will be less loving, or in some way damage that love. When a number of minor disciplinary issues arise these parents, for their own reasons, prefer to adopt an approach whereby, when the detail of an incident emerges, they reason these details in such a way that allows them to see no problem with their child's behaviour. Such incidents can be as simple as giving a note to excuse not doing homework when arguably there was no excuse. Another example is where the parent takes the blame for the child being late for school when it is the child's fault. While this may be legitimate for the odd incident, when parents adopt such an approach for the majority of reoccurring incidences, a cycle of prolonged indiscipline begins. What is also notable about such situations is that when an incident does arise, parents tend to make up their minds having heard the student's version *only*. To compound such a situation the student learns that no matter what they do they will be supported by the home and as a result they continue to have the same reoccurring disciplinary issues over a number of years.<sup>57</sup> One other characteristic that also prevails is when a student is proven to have been involved, with others, in a disciplinary matter. Here, some parents feel it is unfair for their child to accept responsibility until all others involved do so. Such an approach allows the student to learn that they do not have to accept responsibility for their actions if others do not do so as well. No school, indeed, society, can operate such an approach.

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<sup>56</sup> Schickedanz et al., *Understanding Children and Adolescents*, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2001) p 634.

<sup>57</sup> David Shaffer and Katherine Kipp, *Developmental Psychology, Childhood and Adolescence*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (California: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2007) p 602.

In all circumstances where prolonged discipline problems exist it is important to remember treating these situations as a disciplinary matter only is to treat the symptoms rather than the cause. Experience shows that using such a band-aid approach alone very seldom, if ever, works. It is always necessary to address the issue of **why** a teenager is behaving as they do.

## **12. Emotional Issues**

All families have their ups and downs. There may be periods of difficulties with relationships between husband and wife, between parent and child, or between siblings. Indeed, there may also be the trauma of redundancy, illness, or bereavement that may impact on the atmosphere in the home. Some students who experience such family difficulties can continue on and cope without these difficulties impacting on their school lives. However, other students can, and do, encounter situations whereby difficulties in the home have such an emotional impact that emotional and academic progress within the school is hindered.

In such situations it is advisable to provide information to the Year Head/teacher/Guidance Counsellor in order to provide assistance to your child. Such a request will always be treated in the strictest of confidence and the information only used to adapt the school's responses to cater for your child's situation. Without such information schools/teachers may inadvertently treat your child's possible *acting out* or *act inwards* as purely a disciplinary matter and, without knowing, add to their difficulties. Experience shows that when parents withhold vital information – mainly through an unfounded sense of embarrassment – they prolong their child's difficulties and inhibit the school acting in the best interest of the child.



### 13. Preparing The Ground Work For the Future

Adolescence is a stage in a person's life between childhood and adulthood. It is when a young person must move from dependency to independence, autonomy and maturity. The young person – while still being part of a family unit – moves to become part of a peer group and eventually to standing alone as an adult.<sup>58</sup> This is part of the normal human developmental process. However it is also a journey that brings much-discussed challenges, among which is the risk of alcohol and substance abuse.

The most important factors in delaying teenagers from drinking is positive parenting, based on good communication, negotiation, and setting firm limits.<sup>59</sup> The experts document various parenting styles that can influence a teenager's journey through adolescence. It is generally agreed that the most effective parenting style is that of *authoritative parenting*<sup>60</sup> (as opposed to authoritarian). This is a positive parenting style that encourages children to be independent but still places limits and controls on their actions. This style is associated with long term goals of helping teenagers grow into confident individuals, who are separate and independent but also appropriately connected to their family and able to form their own intimate relationships in the future. Adolescents whose parents were involved in setting limits such as where adolescents went after school, and what they were exposed to on T.V. and the internet, were more likely not to drink or use drugs. Research shows that parents who know where their children are and know what their children are doing and who they are with, can reduce the chances of their children getting involved in drinking.<sup>61</sup>

First year is a time when adolescents begin to feel more independent and require more freedom away from their parents. This is a natural and normal part of growing up. Parents<sup>62</sup> have pointed out that difficulties around this subject begin to emerge at the middle of, or end of, 1<sup>st</sup> year for some teenagers, or in 2<sup>nd</sup> year for others,<sup>63</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year for others.<sup>64</sup> The timing seems to depend on the level of both physical and/or psychological maturity. Indeed, research show that “the prevalence of misbehaviour increases significantly between first and second year of the junior cycle”<sup>65</sup> and “second year of secondary school has been characterised as one in which [some] students drift.”<sup>66</sup> Therefore, to make sure that any freedoms to not create difficulties later on, it is recommended that rules and boundaries be set while your child is still malleable and willing to cooperate, i.e. early on in 1<sup>st</sup> year. Experience shows that implementing these boundaries from the start of first year has a

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<sup>58</sup> K. Geldard & D. Geldard, *Counselling Adolescents*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Sage Publications 2006) p 3.

<sup>59</sup> *Straight Talk – A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.

<sup>60</sup> *Straight Talk – A Guide For Parents on Teenage Drinking*, Health Promotion Unit, H.S.E.

<sup>61</sup> *Don't Lose The Head*, The North Dublin City & County Regional Drugs Task Force, 2008.

<sup>62</sup> A Quote from Parent VI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year

<sup>63</sup> A Quote from Parent VII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>64</sup> A Quote from Parent VIII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

<sup>65</sup> Smyth, Emer; Dunne, Allison; McCoy, Selina; and Darmody, Merike, *Pathways Through The Junior Cycle: The Experiences of Second Year Students*, (Dublin: E.S.R.I., 2006).

<sup>66</sup> Smyth, Emer; Dunne, Allison; McCoy, Selina; and Darmody, Merike, *Pathways Through The Junior Cycle: The Experiences of Second Year Students*, (Dublin: E.S.R.I., 2006).

much greater chance of success than trying to impose these boundaries *after* your teenager has become used to a sense of freedom or indeed after an incident has occurred.

It is important that rules are not simply imposed but negotiated and talked through. When people have a significant say in decisions that affect them deeply, they are more likely to feel ownership of these decisions. Therefore, they are more likely to make the decisions work, and less likely to sabotage them.<sup>67</sup> Set realistic rules and boundaries and stick to them. It is also useful to discuss with your child why you need the rules. This can help your child see that you care about their well-being and also help them understand the issues from your perspective. Here are some areas that might be useful when setting these boundaries.

- Set rules around the use of the T.V. and the computer. The over use of a computer, be it Internet or the use of games, is one activity that can cause a teenager to become detached from the family. If your child gets agitated when they are told to stop using the computer, they may be developing a problem. Indeed, if this agitation/restlessness continues<sup>68</sup> until they are allowed to resume computer use, this problem may need to be addressed urgently. Also, if possible, have the computer facing outwards in a family room.
- Know your child's friends' names and their parents' names.
- Talk to the parents of your child's friend and agree boundaries together. This united front can avoid "you're the only Mum/Dad that won't let me..."
- Set a rule whereby they must always tell you where they are/have been and whom they were with and they must always phone if they are going to be late. Agree times to return home.
- Agree that you will always check with the other parents if they are at a house party or a sleep over or if they say they are getting a lift from a friend's parent.
- Do not allow the habit to develop of accepting the word of another teenager about the whereabouts of your child, especially on the phone. Always check with that teenager's parent.<sup>69</sup> If you cannot obtain the telephone number of other parents, it might be useful for the entire group of parents within a year group in a school to agree to share telephone numbers through the class/year parents' representative.

Remember, implementing these boundaries as puberty begins has a much greater chance of success than trying to impose these boundaries *after* an incident has occurred.

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<sup>67</sup> Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics Of Conflict Resolution, A Practitioner's Guide*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) p 191.

<sup>68</sup> *Internet Addiction: The Emergence of a New Clinical Disorder. Cyber Psychology and Behaviour*, University of Pittsburgh. Vol. 1 No. 3, p 237-244.

<sup>69</sup> A Quote from Parent IX – 1<sup>st</sup> Year.

While parents continually need to provide the adolescent with opportunities for change, they also need to continue to exert a level of parental control, remembering that the adolescent is not yet an adult.<sup>70</sup> At times, it might seem easier to back down or give in to your child when boundaries are broken. However, to do so is to gain short term peace but always has negative long-term consequence. Their adolescence will last a number of years and you are in this for the long haul. Sticking to your position is well worth it in the long run. It is very hard, if not impossible, to put the genie back into the bottle. It is recommended throughout this document that you involve yourself in your child's transition. However, this needs to be done in such a way that it respects their ever-increasing need for autonomy and that you use this experience to strengthen your relationship with them. After all, it is the strength of that relationship<sup>71</sup> that is ultimately the only real control you have over your child.

## 14. Conclusion

*Maybe it's time to let go of their hand and instead*

*- look over their shoulder.*

As adults we have experienced the transition from primary to secondary school, from school to work or college, from one workplace to another, or from one relationship to another, or indeed the loss of a loved one. We have survived such transitions by tapping into the skills acquired from earlier or previous experiences. It can, therefore, be argued that what your child is experiencing now is a healthy and indeed necessary opportunity to grow. As long as the emotions and feelings brought about by the move into secondary school are within the normal range, this period can be viewed as a healthy, worthwhile and indeed necessary experience that is all part of becoming a healthy independent adult. Without being exposed to, and learning from, this transition, it would be more difficult for them to cope with later unavoidable transitions.

Finally, your child is now embarking on two very significant transitions, (i) the transition from primary to secondary school, and (ii) the transition from childhood to adolescence. Most students look forward with anticipation to these milestones in their lives and relish meeting new people and exploring their new environment and new subjects. They enjoy their newfound independence and freedom and most grow from these new experiences. However, when they become older we tend to see where things might go wrong rather than where it is going right. Therefore, it might be useful to remember how we celebrated when they took their first step and when they said their first words. Such a view might be useful as they travel these new journeys into secondary school and adolescence.

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<sup>70</sup> K. Geldard & D. Geldard, *Counselling Adolescents*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Sage Publications 2006) p 27.

<sup>71</sup> William Glasser, *For Parents and Teenagers- Dissolving the Barrier Between You and Your Teen*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2003) p 9.

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- Student V – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student VI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student VII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student VIII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student IX – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student X – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XIII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XIV – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XV – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XVI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XVII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XVIII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XIX – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XX – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XXI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XXII – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
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- Student XXXIX – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XL – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Student XLI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
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- Student XLVI – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
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- Parent I – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
- Parent III – 1<sup>st</sup> Year
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# NOTES

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