

Starting Upper High School

A Parent Guide for Neurodivergent Teens

This guide is set up as a checklist so you can focus on what's right for your young person. Transitioning into the senior years of high school brings new academic, organisational, social and emotional demands. These practical checklist items help families set up routines, supports and strategies for success.

Build Familiarity and Confidence

- Visit senior-school spaces (study areas, library, common rooms, classrooms)
- Practice key navigation skills – moving between classes and using school maps
- Talk about the changes to expect – more subjects, different teachers, new routines – and reassure them of who can support

Why? Familiarity and reassurance reduce anxiety and build confidence.

Know the Support Network

- Identify key support staff (year-level coordinators, pastoral care, wellbeing team)
- Teach your teen how to ask for help and who to go to if there's a problem
 - Ask the school about any senior mentoring or wellbeing programs
 - Agree a communication method with the school (email, planner notes)

Why? Knowing where to go and how to ask supports self-advocacy.

Sharpen Organisation & Executive Skills

- Set up a planner or calendar for assignments, exams and activities
- Create clear digital folders for each subject
- Use colour-coded binders or folders for paperwork and notes
- Practice packing for school the night before with the right materials
- Set reminders (digital or diary) for key tasks and deadlines
- Ask the school how they can support (e.g. tutors, study lines, learning support)

Why? Better organisation helps manage increased academic demands.

Social Navigation & Connection

- Check if the school has a buddy system and how to access it
- Encourage friendly contact with peers before school starts if possible
- Discuss lunchtime options (clubs, quiet spaces, eating spots)

Why? Early social strategies reduce stress and promote belonging.

Understand Academic Expectations

- Talk about workload, assessment expectations and how subjects differ
- Encourage communication with teachers about workload and supports
- Help create a comfortable homework space at home
- Build a simple weekly study plan together
- Ensure time to rest and reset is embedded into their weekly timetable

Why? Preparing for senior expectations reduces stress and confusion.



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Strengthen Daily Routines & Independence

- Review and adjust morning/night routines for longer school days
- Work with your young person to set healthy technology habits and boundaries
- Practice transport routines (bus, train, walking) before term starts
- Check that they know where and how to use their locker
- Support them in independently managing personal organisation

Why? Strong routines support time management and independence.

Social Navigation & Peer Connection

- Talk about group work, clubs and extracurricular options
- Encourage connection with peers in low-pressure settings
- Discuss how to handle hurtful or tricky social dynamics
- Encourage keeping in touch with old friends while making new ones

Why? Healthy social navigation supports belonging and confidence.

Celebrate Their Progress

- Notice achievements (managing deadlines, communicating with staff)
- Offer specific praise for effort and problem-solving
- Reflect on what worked well and what can be improved
- Be gentle with expectations – this is a big transition, remember what it was like for you!
- Practise reflective listening (listen and validate instead of problem solving or giving opinions)

Why? Positive reinforcement builds motivation and resilience.

Emotional Wellbeing & Regulation

- Support them to practise calming and self care strategies regularly (you can model by looking after yourself!)
- Engage with professional supports if necessary (e.g. counsellor, psychologist, support group)
- Check in about coping with pressures – workload, friendships, expectations
- Pack items that help during the school day (water bottle, sensory tool, art journal)
- Normalise that overwhelm and mixed feelings are common and okay

Why? Emotional skills support resilience during stressful periods.

Practical Adjustments & Comfort

- Check uniform items for comfort over longer days
- Ensure their locker system is organised for efficient use
- Talk about any adjustments they might need (sensory, timetable flexibility)
- Familiarise your young person with areas they can access if overwhelmed

Why? Practical comfort supports focus and regulation.

