



# TRANSITIONS & TEENS: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

They say that “the only thing permanent in life is change,” and that may very well be true. But just because change is natural, that doesn’t make it any easier – especially for teens. Studies show that adolescents who haven’t tried drugs or alcohol are more likely to start during times of transition in order to cope with stress. But don’t worry – while change is a part of life, risky behavior, like drug and alcohol use, doesn’t have to be. This guide has everything you need to know to help keep your child healthy – and even happy! – during transition periods.



## RECOGNIZE TRANSITIONS

Even life events that are typical and expected – starting puberty or moving up a grade – may feel like a big deal to your tween or teen. By knowing what transitions usually affect kids the most and why, it will be easier for you to recognize the situations that can be emotionally tough for your child.

### THE TRANSITION:

Your child has moved from grade school to middle school or from middle school to high school.

### WHY IT’S TOUGH:

Your child has just gone from being a big fish in a little pond to a little fish in a big pond. “Cool” older kids can be intimidating and may even purposely try to make younger students feel unwelcome (elevator pass, anyone?). Freshmen boys tend to have a particularly hard time with this transition because the girls in their grade want to date juniors and seniors – and they ignore all the boys their own age.

### THE TRANSITION:

Your family has just relocated to a different town.

### WHY IT’S TOUGH:

Being the new kid in school is hard! Your teen is probably worried about meeting new people and making friends in this unfamiliar environment. Plus, kids often target a group or clique that they want to become friendly with – but they may feel unwelcome or unsure how to fit in.

### **THE TRANSITION:**

Your child is going through puberty.

### **WHY IT'S TOUGH:**

Puberty is natural, but it sure doesn't feel that way to a kid going through it. Your child is experiencing major physical and hormonal changes, and she's probably uncomfortable with or embarrassed by her body. Also, even though puberty is normal, almost all kids feel at some point that they're abnormal – and they're too afraid to ask whether something's actually wrong.

### **THE TRANSITION:**

Your tween or teen had a boyfriend or girlfriend at school – but not anymore.

### **WHY IT'S TOUGH:**

You may have shrugged it off as puppy love, but in adolescence, having a significant other is everything. Middle schoolers and high schoolers judge themselves by how others view them, so when a relationship ends, it feels like the ultimate rejection. To make matters worse, break-ups in school are usually accompanied by a fall in popularity and maybe even nasty rumors.

### **THE TRANSITION:**

A big event, such as death, divorce or remarriage, has happened in your immediate family.

### **WHY IT'S TOUGH:**

When the whole family dynamic changes, your kid may be the one who's forced to adjust the most. He's being introduced to new living arrangements, rules, spending habits and/or people. And if your teen has just lost a parent -- both death and divorce can create feelings of loss for kids -- he's probably having a very hard time coping.



## **Top 5 Reasons Teens Use Drugs During Transitions**

**To combat loneliness, low self-esteem, anxiety, or depression**

**To mentally “check out” of family issues or school trouble**

**To ease discomfort in an unfamiliar situation**

**To look cool or change their image/reputation**

**To fit in with a desired group of friends**



## HOW YOU CAN HELP

You can't control the changes that impact your teen, but you can pay attention to his feelings, concerns and needs. Staying involved in your child's life during tough transitions is the single most important thing you can do to help keep him from experimenting with drugs and alcohol. In fact, only 18% of teens whose parents are significantly involved in their life transitions resort to high-risk activities, such as unsafe sex and drug use.



But sometimes, it's easy to get lost in a transition period of your own – or to just get turned off by your teen's negative mood. Here's a checklist to keep in mind the next time your child experiences a dramatic change.



### CHECKLIST

— **Am I encouraging open dialogue?** If your teen believes she can't tell you how she's really feeling, she'll be more likely to turn elsewhere for comfort and relief. Even if you're afraid of what you'll hear, remind your child that she can always talk to you (or another caring adult) about anything – without judgment.

— **Am I setting aside one-on-one bonding time?** If your whole family is going through a stressful transition, such as a move or divorce, your teen may feel neglected. Show your kid you love him by taking him shopping, bowling or out for ice cream – without any siblings tagging along. This special attention will remind him that you're still interested in what's going on in his life. It will also remind him that despite your preoccupation at the moment, you *are* going to pick up on problems or changes in his behavior.

— **Am I discussing the dangers of drugs and alcohol?** Even if they've heard it a million times before, it never hurts to talk to teens about the consequences of drinking and drug use. Try prompting your teen to talk to you honestly about his experience with different substances by asking, "So, have you heard about any kids at your school smoking pot?" or "What's your opinion on teens trying prescription pills?"

— **Am I monitoring and communicating more?\*** Asking nit-picky questions may annoy your teen, but it can also keep her safe! If you get an unexpected or nonsensical response, it can immediately alert you that something is off. You have every right to ask your child which friends she's hanging out with, what they're planning on doing, and where they're staying – and you have the right to check her story or call her cell phone halfway through the night. Kids who are not monitored are 4 times more likely to use drugs than those whose parents monitor their activities.

*\*If your monitoring leads you to observe some disturbing behavior or changes in your child (weight loss/gain, loss of appetite, strange sleeping patterns), you may want to enlist a physician's help.*



## TALKING POINT: YOUR TEEN AND THE ECONOMY

When you're stressed, your kids are stressed – and according to a recent Partnership study, stress is the number one reason teens try drugs. So if you've recently lost your job or have had to make changes to your family's lifestyle, try saying one of the following to your teen:

*“ I know it's frustrating that we don't have as much money as we used to. But this is a temporary situation, and we will get through it just fine as a family. Even if we can't buy the latest things, we will always provide the things you and your siblings need. And honestly, money isn't the most important thing in the world. We're very lucky because we still have our health and each other! ”*

*“ I don't want to give you more details than you would like to know about our family's finances, but remember that I am always willing to answer any questions you have. You don't need to guess or worry about where we stand. I'm happy to talk to you about money – and I'm also here to listen to your concerns. ”*