

How parents can help students in the senior years of school

Andrew Fuller

When you have a student completing the senior years of school, everyone in the family is doing Year 11 or 12. Here are a few ideas for coming through these years flourishing, and having everyone's dignity intact.

Parents have a vital role in helping students:
Manage time
Manage energy
Manage stress
Manage to get everything in at the right time and in the right place.

In addition to this you have to manage yourself.

Developing the System

Regular planned times for study throughout the year creates better results. Short regular sprints of learning are more effective than long study marathons. To create this you need to work out a system.

Sit down with your student and map out an ideal week including-

- Times for sleeping (at least 8 hours a night)
- Times for unwinding and relaxing
- Best breakfast foods
- The best times for study
- The best time of the week for consolidating notes and extending memory
- Time to catch up with friends
- Required school hours
- Time for part time work (less than 10 hours a week)
- How to handle invitations around exam times.

Without a plan, you are simply left with doing what you like when you feel like it and often feeling like studying is not the most likely emotion in teenagers' lives.

Study sprints should be ideally 20 minutes long and never longer than 50 minutes with a ten-minute break between study sessions.

Usually on the weekend, have some time set aside for organising information and testing memory of new information.

Patiently, talk through the system until you all feel that you have the best plan. Ask them how often you should remind them of the system when they don't seem to be following it.

You may also need to discuss minimizing distractions- excessive social media use, listening to music while studying, multi-tasking or chatting with friends online is not compatible with studying. Multi-tasking is just splitting your attention and means you'll need to study four times longer than you need to.

As a parent of a senior school student, keep yourself informed. Come to information sessions and parent-teacher meetings yourself. Stressed students don't always store detailed information well so take notes of key dates and requirements.

Steering students back to the system

It is hard to get through Year 11 or 12 without some meltdowns. When a meltdown occurs, rather than starting a long conversation about it or providing a motivational pep talk,

think about what your student needs- Food? Rest? Exercise? Some social time? Try to quietly arrange for this to occur.

How to deal with the catastrophic thinking

Pacifying or reassuring the unsettled senior school student is a fine art. Acknowledge to yourself in advance that anything you are likely to say is probably going to be heard as the “wrong thing”.

Generally what you do is more important than what you say. Providing meals, comfort and for some, reassuring hugs is often more powerful than words.

Some teens “freeze up with fear” and want to avoid schoolwork completely. Try to avoid getting into lengthy debates about the merits of the current educational system or their own intellectual ability. Instead, go back to basics. Feed them. Hydrate them. Rest them. Then gently bring them back to the topic. Ask them to tell you what they do understand about an issue. If they will initially reply with, “I know nothing” say, “Well, tell me what you think you know”. Slowly rebuild confidence.

What to do when the system breaks down.

When you are planning the system develop a rule of “never miss twice”. We know there are days when even the most well thought through system falls into tatters. Accept this but also plan never to miss twice. For example, I can take a complete break from my study routine for one day but not for two days in a row.

Around August is the most common time for students to become disheartened and lose motivation. However the work done in August and September probably adds more to the final results than any other stage of the year. The reason is that by this time most of the basics have been covered and we are

now able to add the higher order thinking and deepen understanding.

If taking on new information seems too much at this time, go through the process with them of organising information, drawing up flow charts, making memory aides and consolidating notes.

What if my teenager won't listen to me?

Have a confidential chat with one of their key teachers so that they can have a conversation with your student directly about their progress and study strategies.

How to deal with the build up to exams

Here is the time to trust the system. Keep things as calm and consistent as you possibly can. Ensure that your student has enough sleep, good food, exercise and social time.

Consider ceasing part time work in the lead up to exams. Also discuss not using or at least, lessening the use of social media sites.

If your family has major birthdays during this period it may be worth delaying celebrations until after the exam period.

It is not the end of the world

Your student's Year 12 result is not their future. There are many other more important and powerful determinants of success and happiness in life.

Many people who did not get the Year 12 results they wanted find careers where they thrive.

Above all, remain calm and believe in your student. Adding an anxious parent to a panicking teenager is always a recipe for disaster.

Andrew's most recent book is “Unlocking Your Child's Genius” (Finch Publishing, 2015).