MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT TEAM

NHS
Humber Teaching
NHS Foundation Trust

Helping your child start their journey into secondary school

Parent/carer Guide

Talking about it

Transitioning from primary to secondary school is an exciting milestone, but it can also bring feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. For children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or mental health challenges, this change can be particularly difficult.

As a parent, you can play a crucial role in helping your child navigate this transition and ease their worries, no matter their circumstances.

Start by discussing their feelings about the move and explain how secondary school will differ from primary – such as a larger building, new faces, different teachers and classrooms for each subject, and an increase in homework.

Reassure them that it’s normal to feel nervous about starting something new, and that these emotions usually fade with time.

It’s natural that as a parent you may feel some anxiety yourself about this transition for your child. Be mindful not to assume your child also feels this way and focus instead on highlighting the exciting opportunities ahead - new subjects, activities, and friendships. Celebrating the completion of primary school and acknowledging how much they’ve grown can help boost their self-esteem and confidence.

Top Tips

- Talk about your memories of starting secondary school
- Listen to their anxieties and questions
- Let them know that it takes a while to settle into new things but that it won’t always feel like that

Help your child get acquainted with their new school

Many secondary schools offer Year 6 transition days, providing an excellent opportunity for your child to meet teachers, connect with new students, and learn about the school's layout and daily routine. If possible, print a map of the school to review with your child, as reducing unknowns can help ease first-day nerves.

For vulnerable children, schools often arrange additional familiarisation days. These allow your child to meet the SENCO and support staff and explore the school in a quieter setting.

Top Tips

- Visit the school in-person or watch a virtual tour
- Learn as much as you can from the school's website
- Find summer holiday clubs and activities at the school, this will help them become more familiar with the setting and hopefully make new friends before school starts

Make sure essential information is communicated to the secondary school

This is especially crucial for children with SEND or anxiety. Confirm that your primary school has shared all relevant paperwork and communicated your child's needs to the new school. You can also arrange a meeting with secondary staff to discuss support, particularly if your child has an education, health, and care (EHC) plan. Additionally, review the school's SEN policy on their website to familiarise yourself with their approach.

Prepare in advance

Aim to get organised over the summer rather than leaving everything until the last minute, as this can add stress for both you and your child. Use the time for activities like shopping for a new uniform, getting a haircut, or choosing new stationery. These outings provide a chance to bond, chat, and build your child's confidence.

Many secondary students begin traveling independently for the first time. Practice the route together, and then encourage your child to try it solo or with a friend. Plan out the first day, whether they prefer to go with you, meet a friend along the way, or go alone.

Encourage the development of independence and organisational skills

Secondary school brings greater demands, so preparation is key to building your child's skills and confidence, helping them settle in more quickly. Encourage them to take on tasks themselves, such as arranging to meet friends, running small errands (which is great practice for lunchtime independence), or organising their bag for a day out. However, tailor these activities to what feels manageable for your child. It's perfectly okay if they need more support than others.

Once school begins, foster independent organisation with practical tools like post-it notes to list daily necessities, boxes for storing books and worksheets, and an evening routine of checking their school planner, preparing their uniform, and packing their bag.

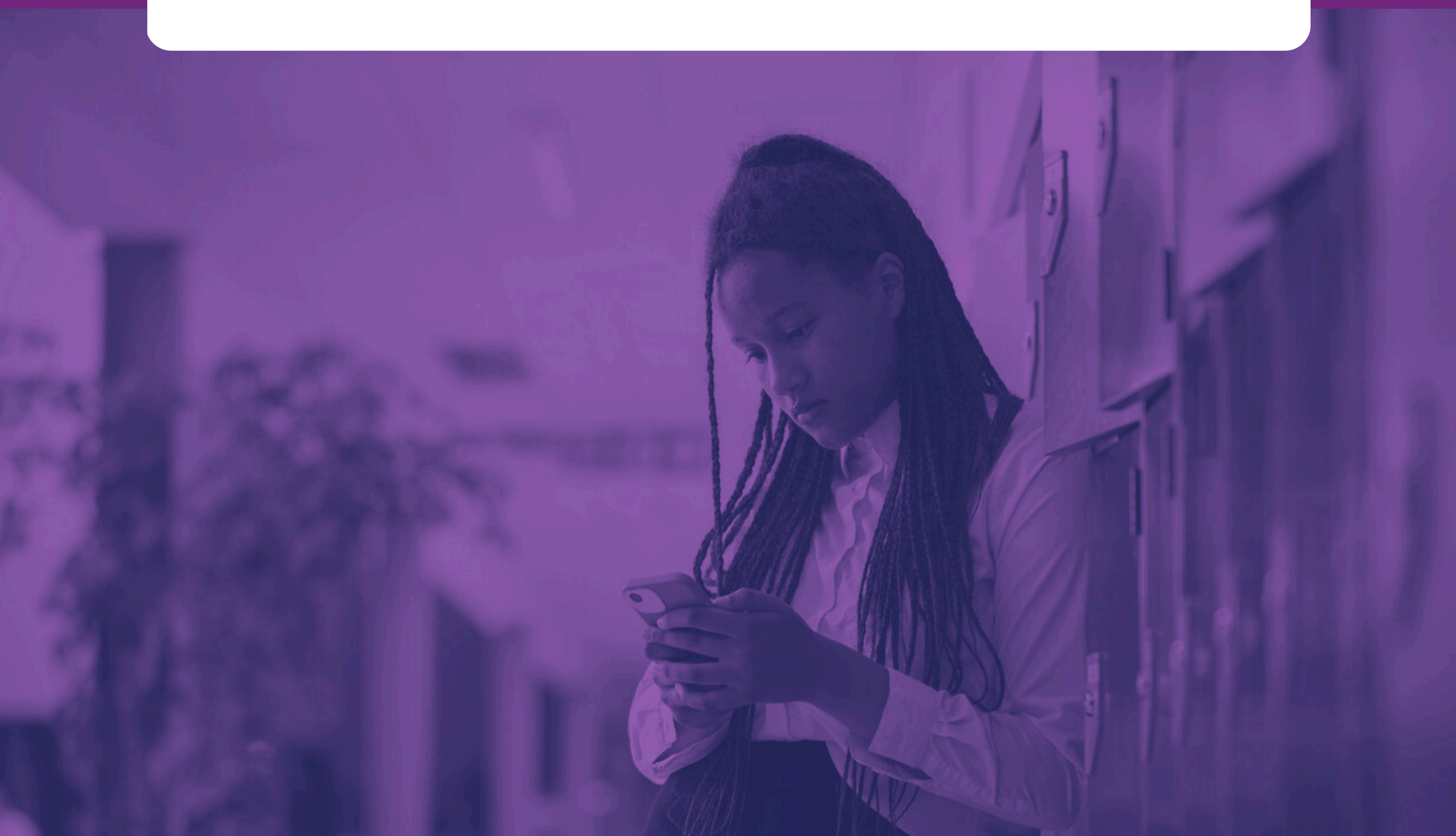
> Students' major concerns are getting lost or told off for being late. We expect that in the first few weeks. All staff will be looking out for the Year 7s. Reassure them it's not a problem.
>
> Secondary School Teacher (Young Minds UK)

Allow time for adjustment and maintain some comforting routines

Familiar friends and routines can be especially comforting during the exhausting early weeks, especially if your child is struggling to settle in or doesn’t know anyone at their new school. Spending time with primary school friends or engaging in familiar activities can offer a much-needed break from the demands of starting something new.

Too much change at once can be overwhelming, so while it's wonderful if they eagerly embrace new experiences, don’t worry if they take things slowly. They need time to adjust and relax. Avoid the temptation to ask too many questions; give them space to process and settle in at their own pace.

Finally, give it time. Settling in may take longer than you expected and it may not be a linear process, particularly for children with additional needs. If you are concerned it is a good idea to check in with your child’s form tutor or SENCO.



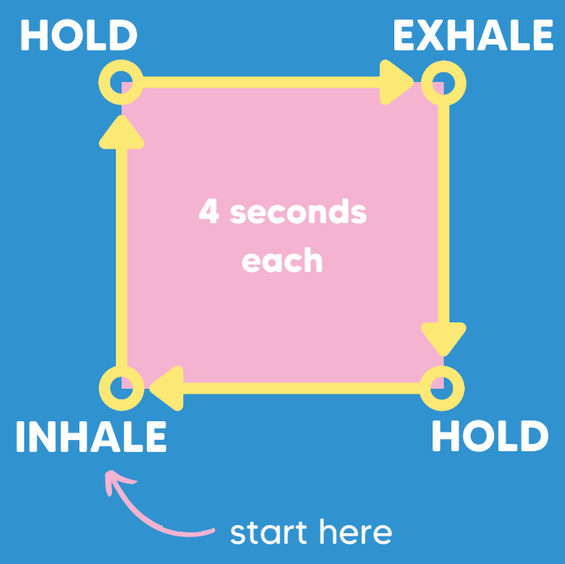
Coping Strategies

Breathing and grounding techniques for stress and anxiety are great go-to strategies for when young people need to feel calm, whether that be in school, at home or anywhere.

Coping strategies only take a few minutes, they can be done anywhere and for as long or as short as they like. They will benefit if you do them regularly as part of their daily routine, so get to know them and practice them when they're calm so that they're better prepared to use them when you need to.

Below you'll find our top 8 go-to coping strategies for bringing a sense of calm over body and mind. You can download these, plus an extra special bumper pack by clicking the link in our Instagram bio.

BOX BREATHING



5, 4, 3, 2, 1

5 things you can see

4 things you can touch

3 things you can hear

2 things you can smell

1 thing you can taste

FIVE FINGER BREATHING

Hold one hand out. With your other hand, trace each finger up as you breathe in and trace each finger down as you breathe out.

BODY SCAN

Sit quietly or lie down.
Start at one end of your body and focus on each body part.
Notice any areas of tension then soften and relax.
Continue until your whole body feels completely relaxed.

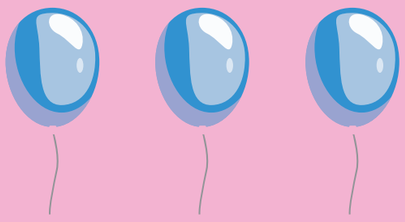
ROOM SEARCH

Sit quietly and scan the room. Look for and say what things you can see that fit into a particular category.

e.g.
Things that are (colour)
Things that are (shape)
Things that are (material)

BALLOON BREATHING

Take a deep breathe in and fill your belly like you're inflating a balloon, count 1, 2, 3, 4 to breathe in and fill the balloon in your belly.



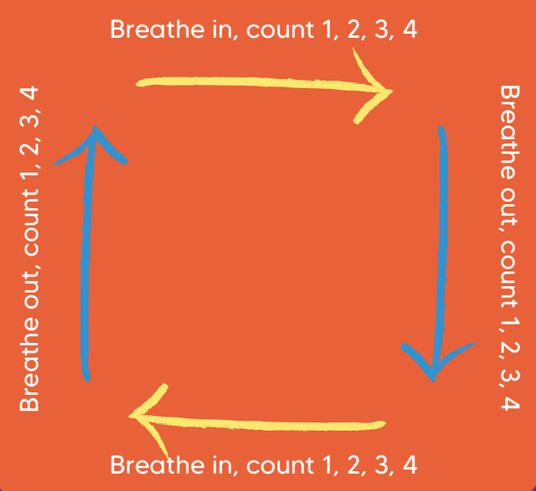
Pause and let all of the air out like you're letting a balloon deflate, count 1, 2, 3, 4 to breath out and let the balloon go down

EARTHING

Take off your shoes and walk on natural surfaces like grass, sand or soil.

SQUARE BREATHING

Imagine you're drawing a square...



Young Person Activity 1: Worry Tree

Meet the worry tree, when you sit down to think about your worries, a structured technique called the ‘worry tree’ can help keep you focused on understanding the difference between problems you can solve and hypothetical worries that are beyond your control.

Application of the worry tree helps young people manage stress and anxiety by teaching them practical techniques rooted in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

Using the tree below, think about all the things you may be worried about when thinking about the transition to secondary school, and follow through the arrows to challenge your thoughts.

Young Person Activity 2: Strength Spotting

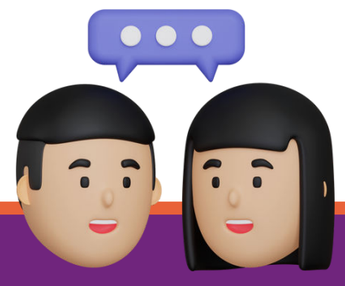
Spotting and tapping into your strengths can be game changing. It could be that you're an amazing artist or great at sports, you could be a great listener or a supportive friend. We all sparkle and shine in different and unique ways.

Spotting your strengths will help you to see yourself in a more positive light, helping you to re-frame your negative thoughts quicker and more effectively.

Using the prompts below, take a moment to reflect on and celebrate your strengths, or your sparkle and shine as we like to say! Remember you are unique and that's awesome.

Things I'm good at...

Things my friends would say about me...



Things I like about myself...

Things my family love about me...

Things I'm proud of...

I am unique because...

Young Person Activity 3: My Support System

Big changes come with big feelings and emotions, sometimes new and difficult, that you might not know how to deal with.

To better help you prepare and deal with this transition, identify people who make up your support system who are there to help you.

These are the people you can turn to when things get hard or overwhelming, they can support you by listening to you, giving you advice or reminding you of the extra support that is available to young people if they need it.

Write down the names of all the people you can think of that you want to be in your support system. This can be anyone you trust, anyone who makes you feel good about yourself or even your pets!

Remember to connect with these people whenever you feel like you need some extra support. If you'd rather speak to somebody anonymously, go to the back page of this resource where you'll find support service contact information.

MHST parent support

Parent-led CBT: We offer a six-week workshop, delivered to a group, in a local health centre, to support parents of children and young people who are struggling with anxiety and worry. You can approach your Senior Mental Health Lead and emotional wellbeing support within your school setting for further information or contact the MHST Coordination Team direct on 01482 205205.

You can talk to us about anything. We're in this together.

Support services

Local Support

Hull & East Yorkshire Mind
01482 240200
heymind.org.uk

Hull Thrive
howareyoufeeling.org.uk

Young Healthy Minds
eastridinghealthandwellbeing.co.uk

National Support

Childline
0800 1111
childline.org.uk

Young Minds
youngminds.org.uk

Anna Freud
annafreud.org

Kooth
Podcast
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