

10 things teens (and parents) should know about high school

Looking back, most parents would agree that their high school experiences would have been better if only they had...(fill in the blank). Answers might range from wishing they had studied harder, taken different courses, or tried out for that sports team. Simply stated, things might have gone better if they had done something differently. And it might have been different if someone had offered a few suggestions or an occasional warning about common pitfalls.

So, we informally asked the question of people of various ages from various schools and backgrounds in New York State. Although this unscientific survey and small group of people cannot be considered statistically accurate, the responses were telling. These teachers, administrators, parents and recent high school graduates each had different stories to share, but it soon was evident that their answers fit into one of several categories. Compiled into a “top 10” list, their answers provide a great starting place for parents to have a conversation with their teens about making the most out of high school. The list is not a parental lecture or college research; it represents the ideas of adults, who when looking back, wish someone had shared these simple ideas.

The list

- 1) **Seek and accept advice.** By high school, most teens demonstrate a strong measure of independence—independence that often borders on stubbornness. Despite passing time and changing technologies, people and their basic behaviors remain the same. Former high school students, from grandparents to college freshmen, have already traveled this path. Take a moment to ask them to share their experiences. Ask what they learned from their high school years. Chances are, they will have personal stories and wisdom to help a willing listener make the most out of high school. *“I wish I had listened.”—Librarian*
- 2) **Take high school seriously.** High school paves the way for college and careers, so it is critical for students to make their most of their time. That means taking the right classes and working hard to get the best grades they can. Too often, teens fail to apply themselves or look for shortcuts to simply get by. Later, they discover that a lack of effort has limited their opportunities. Most students who fail to graduate and who underachieved say they wish they could go back and do it all again—with the goal to succeed. *“I want to go back. I didn’t do good when I was there . I didn’t get how important it was.”—Farm laborer*
- 3) **Respectfully communicate with others.** Most teens will eventually find themselves at odds with a classmate or, on occasion, with teachers or administrators. Blowing up in anger or allowing a bad situation to continue is never productive. And simply avoiding a tough situation can undermine a teen’s self-esteem and lead to poor performance and a negative attitude toward school. The best solution is to respectfully (the key word is “respectfully”) share your view. Like the workplace, school is filled with compromise and cooperation. If a sensible conversation fails to settle things, then respectfully take the problem to the next higher authority. *“It would have been better if I had not allowed people to intimidate me.”—Master’s student*

- 4) **Make good use of technology.** Cell phones, i-Pods, laptops, digital cameras, Google, Facebook—the list of technology is seemingly endless. Most students embrace technology as entertainment, but they overlook it as a powerful tool. Hardware and software can enable teens to research, collaborate, and create in the class, at home, and even while riding the school bus. Harnessing technology’s potential will be a critical survival skill in college and in the modern workplace. *“With all of this technology, homework is easier than it has ever been. You can search the Internet while you update Facebook.”—Computer technician*
- 5) **Develop good study habits.** Good grades are only part of the story. Schools are filled with tales of students who earned good grades in high school only to struggle in college. High school is a time to learn to be organized, to meet deadlines, and to manage school, extracurricular, and personal obligations. This will be especially critical at college where classes are more difficult, distractions are plentiful, and there are no parents to help keep their children focused. *“I loved my high school experience. I only wish I had tried harder.”—Psychologist*
- 6) **Set goals.** Everyone needs something to aim for, some motivation to get out of bed everyday and tackle life’s challenges. Simply stated, we need goals, because without them, we risk wasting time doing things that are of little or no benefit. With so much at stake, high school students cannot squander their opportunities. Goals are both long-term, such as choosing a college or career path, and short-term, such as improving that math grade or losing a couple of pounds. *“My parents didn’t go to a four-year college. I didn’t know what I had to do to get in. My grades would have been a lot better.”—School administrator*
- 7) **Get involved.** Find something worthwhile to do at school besides core classes. Become a part of a sports team or an afterschool club—it’s a healthy break from endless study. Volunteer for school or community service. In addition to looking good on a college or job application, it provides a different perspective of people and the role we all play in building a strong society. *“I wish I had taken an art or cooking class.”—Pre-med student.*
- 8) **Be positive.** A positive attitude will yield big dividends when things get difficult. Complaining about a class will not make it easier to learn the material or finish the homework. Attitude can be equally important when dealing with social and personal problems. Understanding that other people and circumstances are often beyond our ability to change is the first step in taking control of our lives. Life is filled with unpleasant moments, but tackling the worst is generally easiest when wearing a smile! *“I hated school. Never understood why I had to take some classes. I could have done better if I had a better attitude.”—Deliveryman*
- 9) **Be an individual.** It is almost impossible to overstate the power of peer pressure. Everyone wants to be included, to feel a part of the group. Sadly, that can sometimes mean compromising personal values and beliefs. Negative influences should never coerce a teen to do something he or she is not comfortable doing. Great leaders do the right thing, even in the face of adversity. *“I shouldn’t have spent all my time with my boyfriend. I could have done tons of other things.”—Mother*
- 10) **Grow from the experience.** Part of becoming an adult is learning how to celebrate success and to learn from struggles. High school, like other aspects of

life, is filled with ups and downs. A student's high school experience is a training ground for what comes later. This is where a teen truly learns to make adult-like decisions. Making mistakes is a natural part of the process. It is critical for teens to understand that high school is not the end of the journey. Like a quiz or homework assignment, high school is practice for the big test that comes later – life. *“Even with all of my mistakes – and I made a pile of them – I learned a lot about life and myself. I could have done better in so many places, but high school helped make me, for good or bad, who I am today.”—Editor*

Looking for more resources?

Internet

- Top 10 skills for high schoolers—another perspective on what’s important for high school students.
<http://school.familyeducation.com/skill-builder/college-prep/37653.html>
- Social skills, extracurricular activities in high school pay off later in life —the importance of soft skills and their impact on a student’s future.
<http://news.illinois.edu/news/09/0325success.html>
- You don’t have to play football to score a touchdown—tips for studying, listening, managing time, and remembering.
<http://frank.mtsu.edu/~studskl/hsindex.html>
- Opening door to self-determination skills—a great guide to help in planning for the future after high school.
<http://dpi.wi.gov/sped/pdf/tranopndrs-self-determination.pdf>
- Ipl2 for teens—a combination of two library databases providing great resources for high school students.
<http://www.ipl.org/div/teen/>

Books

- “High School 101: Freshman Survival Guide” by Dawn Burnette—a “view from the inside” written by high school sophomores Chock full of humorous tips, practical advice, and serious anecdotes about subjects as diverse as depression, dating, and study habits.
- “Countdown to College: 21 To Do Lists for High School: Step-By-Step Strategies for 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th Graders 2nd Edition” by Valerie Pierce and Cheryl Rilly—a step-by-step timeline to help students get the most out of their high school years and improve their chances of 'getting where they want to go.' Self-discovery with lots of details necessary to the college admissions process
- “The Teen Health Book: A Parents' Guide to Adolescent Health and Well-Being” by Ralph Lopez I—a detailed look at the factors impacting teen health from physical changes to lifestyle choices.