

## INSIGHTS

### Supporting boys in early secondary school



The first year of secondary school is a time of massive change and boys can struggle more than girls. Even though some of our boys are physically mature and look big and grown-up, this time can be challenging, unpredictable and full of big emotions.

Buried under some early adolescent angst are tendencies for forgetfulness and poor organisation due to brain pruning, which is a 'trimming down' process in the teenage brain where irrelevant/unused mental connections from childhood are lost.

The larger environment of secondary school with its many different classes, and different teachers who have varied expectations can be particularly confusing for boys. Anxiety is often surging through their hormonally charged bodies and parents need to be mindful to recognise that for many pubescent boys, every day at school feels like going into a war zone because it is so unpredictable.

#### Have realistic expectations

In this transitional year parents need to be creating as calm and predictable an environment as possible at home given the everyday stress at school. Parents can do this by avoiding too many questions and too much pressure especially around homework. Especially avoid criticism, nagging and lecturing — they won't improve anything.

#### Keep things light

Boys appreciate lightness and humour, especially when they may be struggling with anxiety or worry. Maybe you could find some funny, goofy cat or dog videos to show them or share some funny experiences that might trigger the beautiful happy neurochemicals in their brain. Be a bit ridiculous – intentionally.

#### Share developmental changes

Have brief conversations with your son about brain changes, especially pruning, so that he can understand why he may be struggling with organisation and be forgetting things that he used to remember. Once he knows there is a reason, he'll tend to manage it better — indeed many boys are relieved! Help your son to work out ways to remember important stuff.

#### Stoke his spark

If your son has a passion whether that be surfing, music, soccer or gaming help him keep it alive and burning throughout high school. Disengagement is very common among boys in the middle school years and those who have an interest they love and are capable at, tend to struggle less. Obviously if it is gaming there needs to be healthy boundaries around prioritising schoolwork ... and a firm bedtime.

## Watch for red flags

While it is normal to experience anxiety at the beginning of the school year, some anxiety can be ongoing and difficult for parents to identify. Some boys display anxiety through silliness, inappropriate behaviour, an increase in aggression often toward siblings, disrespectful language towards parents, changes in eating patterns and struggles with sleep. If you have ongoing concerns check in with your son's year coordinator and seek help.

## Practise kindness

Even though this sounds counterintuitive if you are experiencing some hot moments with your early secondary school son, kindness especially in small unexpected ways has enormous power. Our boys struggle with low self-worth and when they muck up they struggle even more with feeling acceptable and loved.

Above all, reassure your son often that you love him fiercely and unconditionally, no matter what.



### Maggie Dent

Commonly known as the 'queen of common sense', Maggie Dent has become one of Australia's favourite parenting authors and educators, with a particular interest in the early years, adolescence and resilience. She has written seven major books including the bestselling *Mothering Our Boys* and her 2020 release, *From Boys to Men*. Maggie is host of the ABC podcast, [Parental As Anything](#). She is the mother of four sons and a very grateful grandmother. For further details visit [maggiedent.com](http://maggiedent.com)