Year 7 students can look up to older students in more ways than one, writes KATE WALSH.

Nerves on the first day of high school are par for the course.

The students are taller, there are a raft of new subjects and your class is filled with kids you’ve never met before.

Will you get lost on the way to your next class? Will you make friends? Will you like your teachers?

But for most students in schools across the Illawarra, their trepidation is eased through peer support programs, where, for their first few months, older students act as mentors to help guide them.

At The Illawarra Grammar School, a formal peer support program linking year 7 and year 10 students has been running for more than two decades.

Peer support co-ordinator and HSIE teacher Amanda Lowe said it helped create a seamless move from primary to high school for young students.

"The whole aim of it is to provide a gentle transition for the kids coming through from year 6. It has benefits for them in terms of connections, building relationships with the year 10 students and seeing a bit of role modelling occurring."

But it's not only the lower grade that benefits from the arrangement, Mrs Lowe said.

Their year 10 facilitators also learn how to plan a lesson, become responsible for others' learning and work on their leadership skills.

"From a year 10 perspective it's a steep learning curve in terms of having a module they have to deliver. It can be a challenge to keep the students engaged and on task."

Year 10 leader Georgia Wallace, 15, said it had been challenging to run the peer support sessions, but she found getting to know her charges rewarding. "We get to share our experiences growing up in the school and tell them about the things they might experience too."
"It makes it really rewarding to see the year sevens become more independent while you work with them."

The year 10 students are given training to run the sessions and are responsible for delivering a module on values, including the importance of respecting one another, decision making and building relationships.

Peer support begins when year 6 students come to the senior school for orientation and lasts for two terms the following year, with students meeting once a week for activities and discussion.

Bella Taylor, 12, thought it was good to have older students to talk to about any problems or concerns she was having.

"It's a good experience because if you were in a situation and don't want to talk to a teacher about it, you can go to the peer support leaders," she said.

"You get to meet new people and you make more friends, with the leaders and other students."

TIGS runs their peer support program with the assistance of Peer Support Australia, a non-profit organisation that assists nine schools in the Wollongong area and more than 1000 across the country implement their programs. Peer Support Australia is holding workshops in Wollongong on August 26. For more information visit peersupport.edu.au.