

SMALL STEPS FOR BIG CHANGE



A guide for teachers to support
students starting secondary school

STARTING SECONDARY SCHOOL IS A BIG CHANGE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

You can probably still remember your early days at high school: a new environment, unfamiliar faces, older kids, noise and chaos, timetables, new classmates and multiple teachers.

It's easy to feel lost and overwhelmed.

In fact, research has found student engagement and their sense of wellbeing takes a dive during this time.*

The good news is, there are many ways schools can support students during this time. Doing so, will help set your Year 7 students up for a positive school experience from the start.

* Reference: NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



THE FOUR PILLARS OF WELLBEING



This guide offers ideas for helping new students to transition to high school. Our approach to wellbeing is based on four concepts.



Connectedness

Connectedness involves the feelings of belonging that a student develops through their relationships with their peers and teachers within the school community.



Sense of self

Sense of self involves what students think, feel and believe about themselves. Sense of self is formed by the individual and their relationships, interactions and experiences. It manifests itself in the student's values, attitudes and behaviours.



Resilience

Building resilience involves the empowerment of the student to be positive, proactive and resourceful in dealing with life experiences. Resilient students have the ability to reflect on and learn from their experiences and to creatively turn challenges into opportunities for growth and learning.



Sense of possibility

A strong sense of possibility involves an awareness and belief that positive outcomes can be achieved in the future. It empowers individuals to take responsibility for enhancing their sense of self, developing and maintaining positive relationships and turning challenges into opportunities.



RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION

Make connections early. Building relationships in the first few weeks is more important than learning content for ensuring students feel safe and positively connected.

Offer opportunities for interactions. Let students and their families to get to know each other, the teachers and other key staff. These connections help students manage anxieties, and build friendships.

Provide opportunities for older students to take on leadership and nurturing roles. Students across cohorts should be part of the change by creating peer and leadership roles, and providing opportunities for students to share their opinions.



To support transition, we have approximately 50 Year 9 and 10 students trained as Peer Support Leaders who run various events and parts of the transition program. This enables primary school students to learn from experienced peers and have a consistent person to guide them through their transition to high school.

- Golden Grove High School



5 reasons why a successful transition matters

Here are some facts shared by the [NSW Department of Education](#). They point to the importance of creating a strong sense of belonging for students as they move from Year 6 to Year 7.



Relationships in Year 6 are a strong predictor of how students will feel in Year 7. According to Tell Them From Me data, kids who report strong peer friendships and relationships in Year 6 also report a sense of belonging in Year 7. In their first year of high school, students are more than three times as likely to feel a sense of belonging if they have positive friendships than those without positive friendships.



Academic outcomes are also linked to a student's sense of belonging, pointing to the importance of placing wellbeing at the centre of your transition plans. Studies have shown a feeling of inclusion at high school impacts motivation and self-efficacy.



Friendships play an important role in the transition from Year 6 to Year 7. Students with close friendships and peer relationships during the transition process are more likely to settle easily into high school and form new friendships.



Research shows that students' sense of belonging drops when they move into high school. Students from disadvantaged groups, including those from low-SES backgrounds and Aboriginal students, see a bigger decline in their feeling of belonging when they shift from Year 6 to Year 7.



Most students are highly engaged in primary school, but this drops between Year 6 and Year 7. One measure of student engagement, for example, found a decline in the number of students who value school and try hard to succeed.



A feeling of belonging at school is linked to a range of wellbeing outcomes, including higher levels of happiness, self-esteem, improved coping skills and lower emotional distress. School belonging is also linked to lower levels of disruptive behaviour, bullying and risk-taking behaviours.

6 TIPS FOR CREATING A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION



ReachOut, a not-for-profit mental health group for young people, has suggested these activities for helping your students experience a smooth transition that sets them up to thrive at school.

1. Create a hang-out space. Allocate an area of the school for the year group to gather during breaks so they have opportunities to socialise.

2. Organise a special event. ReachOut suggests a camp or special day early in Term 1 to create a sense of shared identity and experience. Some Peer Support schools do this with their Peer Leaders involved too.

3. Position teachers at set spots in the school grounds. For the first few weeks, consider placing teachers in particular spots to help students move between classes. This will help students find their way around the school, and help them feel connected to the teachers.

4. Let students know where to get support. Make sure the Year 7 students know where key staff are located, and how to find help and support. Peer Leaders can support your students with this, if you're a Peer Support school.

5. Use older students as mentors, buddies and peer supports. Formal and informal opportunities for older students to support your Year 7 students will help your newcomers feel welcome, and will build leadership skills among older students. This also helps develop an ongoing culture of connectedness across the school.

6. Give students a welcome pack. This can include a welcome letter, a map of the school, key information like term dates and timetables, and photos of class teachers.



Support the transition to high school with the Peer Support Program

The Peer Support Program offers resources for both high schools and primary schools to support Year 6 students move into high school.

High schools use the program to help foster relationships and introduce incoming Year 7 students to their school. Primary schools use the program to build a range of skills, like confidence and organisation, in their Year 6 students that will support them to navigate high school.

The start of high school is usually the time when peer groups are established. The Peer Support Program can help students develop new friendships and connections across the school community.

The Peer Support Program helped me adapt to high school because they (the Peer Leaders) helped me get around the school when I was lost. And I knew I could always go to them when I had a problem or I was struggling with studying or being organised.

I just felt like I could talk to them about anything.

- Harper, Year 7, Mamre Anglican College

THE EVIDENCE FOR CONNECTEDNESS

Research shows that when we feel connected it impacts our sense of wellbeing. There's a window of opportunity early in Term 1 to set your new students on a path to feeling a sense of belonging in their school community.

Feeling connected at school is linked to academic outcomes.

A US longitudinal study looked at the extent to which school connectedness perceptions are associated with academic outcomes in disadvantaged areas. The study involved 330 students in Year 6 as they transitioned into middle school. The research found that, on average, perceived school connectedness declined across the year. The researchers also found a relationship between perceived school connectedness and academic outcomes. The students who felt supported at school also achieved higher academic results.

Being a peer mentor can boost a young person's sense of self.

Another study in the US looked at whether peer helping programs supported high school students connectedness, attachment and self-esteem. The research involved 46 teens mentoring younger kids, and their outcomes were compared to a control group of 45 classmates who were not involved in the program. The results found that the group who were mentors had improved self-esteem, connectedness and academic outcomes. The researchers endorsed the use of peer support programs in schools.

Measuring school connectedness

Studies have used the following statements to measure students' feelings of school connectedness, asking how strongly they agree or disagree.

- It is important for me to be at school every day.
- People at school expect me to do well.
- I try hard on schoolwork.
- My classes are interesting to me.
- I like school.
- My teachers have gotten to know me well.
- My teachers respect me.
- Most people in my school trust me.
- If I need help on my schoolwork I know someone I could ask.
- I get into conversations with adults at my school.

ACTIVATE PEER SUPPORT IN YOUR SCHOOL

A practical way to build belonging,
leadership and student wellbeing

The Peer Support Program is an evidence-based, whole of school approach that can form a key part of your school's wellbeing strategy.

The program involves senior students mentoring groups of between eight and ten students from Year 7. The groups meet weekly for 40-minute sessions, across eight weeks. Each session is supported by a module, provided by the Peer Support Program resources. The modules cover a range of topics, including resilience, values and integrity, and anti-bullying.

There are additional resources schools can run throughout the year to reinforce the module lessons.

Research into schools who have run the Peer Support Program over several years found:

- 86% of teachers said the program enabled students to experience a better transition into high school
- 69% of younger students reported greater feelings of acceptance and inclusion
- 80% of Peer Leaders felt they experienced personal growth, 82% felt they improved their leadership skills, and 89% improved their confidence



According to the 2025 Mission Australia Youth Survey Report, 77% of young people identify friends as a helpful source of support, highlighting the important role peers play in young people's wellbeing.

AN ORIENTATION FRAMEWORK

The Peer Support Program offers an orientation framework, which empowers senior students to support Year 7 students transition into their school.

If your school is a Peer Support Program member, the framework is available via the members' portal.

There are three components in this framework, which contain activities and opportunities for student discussion. These modules help validate young people's feelings and experiences, and build a sense of connection and belonging.

Making connections. The senior students run activities to help incoming students get to know each other. They discuss ways to make friends and participate in the school community.

Getting to know my school. The senior student help incoming students learn how to find their way around the school, where to get help, and understand their responsibilities.

Being organised. The senior students facilitate discussions and activities that help students understand their timetables, how to balance school demands, and organising an effective way to study.



Peer Support at Bowral High School has been a great success in building positive relationships between our junior and senior students, as well as helping to develop a sense of belonging among our Year 7 students.

- Andrew Hawker
Year 7 Advisor
Bowral High School

Watch teachers and students talk about how Peer Support helps the transition from Year 6 to Year 7



In this 3-minute video, Year 7 students and their Year 7 Coordinator from Mamre Anglican College talk about how Peer Support helped students have a positive experience in their first year of high school.



In this 2-minute video, teachers and students at Robertson Public School discuss how Peer Support helps prepare Year 6 students from a small regional primary school to a much larger high school.

HOW TO INTRODUCE THE PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM TO YOUR SCHOOL



Step 1: Register online and book a workshop

Complete the 'Join Peer Support' form on our website. You will be asked to reserve your place at one of our training workshops.

Step 2: Complete your payment

After you've registered online, we will email you an invoice within 48 hours. You will gain access to the members' portal when we receive your payment.

Step 3: Login to the members' dashboard

The members' dashboard gives you access to the resources you need to run the program.

Your membership licence is valid for 12-months, and you will be invited to renew it before it expires. Most schools continue to run the program ongoing, and see a big impact on school culture over time.

Step 4: Attend training

The teacher who is responsible for the program at your school – your Peer Support Coordinator – attends a Peer Support workshop. They will learn everything they need to know to plan and implement the program during the workshop.

We encourage schools to train more than one teacher in the Peer Support approach to build capacity across the school.

Our training provides your Peer Support Coordinator with a three-year accreditation to implement and run the program. This accreditation is valid at any member school.

Step 5: Implement and run the program

You're ready to go. Our Wellbeing Education Consultants are only a phone call or email away and can provide you with all the support you need to feel confident in implementing the Peer Support Program in your school.

Now you just need to decide the finer details of your program, such as which module to run, when to run it, and how to group your students.

Join a Peer Support workshop

The teacher who is responsible for the Peer Support Program at your school needs to attend a workshop to become an accredited Peer Support Coordinator. We recommend the face-to-face workshop for new coordinators, which includes time for planning, group activities, and one-on-one input from our facilitator. We also encourage schools to train two or more staff members.

[Register Now!](#)

Face-to-face vs online workshops

Our workshops are available in both face-to-face and online formats, allowing schools to choose the option that best suits their needs.

Face-to-face workshops provide a full-day, interactive experience with opportunities to collaborated, plan your implementation and receive support from our facilitators.

Online workshops offer a flexible two-hour training option covering the key elements of the Peer Support Program and accrediting teachers as Peer Support Coordinators.

Both workshop formats provide the foundation needed to confidently implement Peer Support at your school.

[Find Out More!](#)

Join our online workshops

You can join our two-hour online workshop, which is an abridged version of the one-day training. This accredits teachers as Peer Support Coordinators, but excludes time for planning and one-on-one advice from our facilitator. Sessions run frequently throughout school term. Check our website for more details.

[View Workshop Dates Here](#)

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Find out more about the Peer Support Program
and how it can help your students to thrive.

Contact us to find out more.

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