PATHWAY RESOURCE GUIDE

Momentum

Building the Skills Teens Need for High School and Beyond

Why This Transition Is Different — and What Actually Helps

Koy Roberts, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist
Dallas–Fort Worth | drkoyroberts.com

Why High School Is a Different Kind of Transition

Parents often expect that the second school transition — from middle school to high school — will be easier than the first. After all, the student has done this before. They know how to move between classes, manage a locker, navigate a larger building, deal with multiple teachers.

And yet many families find that the high school transition is harder, not easier. The reasons are developmental and structural at once. Where the middle school transition was largely about navigating a new environment, the high school transition is about navigating an emerging identity. The stakes feel higher. The choices feel more permanent. The freedoms — and the risks — multiply.

Here is what the research consistently shows about the freshman year of high school:

- **Ninth grade is a documented inflection point.** Across multiple studies, ninth grade has been identified as a year of elevated risk for academic decline, disengagement, and mental health concerns.
- **Mental health trajectories diverge.** Longitudinal research has identified distinct mental health trajectory classes across the school transition years — meaning not all teens follow the same path. Pre-transition skills and supports help determine which path a teen is on.
- **Coping and self-regulation become decisive.** Recent research on freshman adaptation has shown that programs targeting coping skills, time planning, hope, and self-assessment improve school adaptation. The skills that protect a freshman are skills that can be taught.
- **Goal clarity matters more than ever.** Hope therapy research has highlighted the role of clear goals and motivational pathways in successful transition — particularly for adolescents who are starting to think about their post-high-school future.

By the time a teenager enters ninth grade, the questions are no longer just about fitting in. They are also about becoming. Who am I going to be? What am I capable of? Where am I headed? The teens who navigate high school well are the ones equipped to engage these questions, not avoid them.

What Changes in High School

Academic Demands Multiply

High school courses move faster, demand more independent reading, require more sustained attention, and depend more heavily on planning across multiple-day and multiple-week timelines. Tests carry more weight. Grades begin to matter for college admissions, scholarships, and self-image. Many teens are not yet equipped to manage this level of complexity — not because they aren't capable, but because the executive functioning skills required are still developing.

Social Stakes Intensify

Friend groups in high school are larger, more fluid, and more stratified. Romantic relationships often begin in earnest. Social media operates as a shadow social environment with its own rules and consequences. Teens are simultaneously trying to fit in and trying to differentiate — and the developmental urgency of both is real.

Identity Becomes the Project

Adolescence is, developmentally, the project of identity formation. High school is the laboratory. Teens experiment with values, beliefs, presentations, friend groups, interests, and styles. From the outside this can look like instability. From the inside, it's the necessary work of becoming a self.

Risk and Reward Calibration Shifts

Adolescent brains are highly responsive to reward and not yet equipped with adult-level inhibitory control. This isn't a flaw — it's a feature of adolescence that allows young people to take the risks necessary to leave childhood. But it does mean that high school is a period of elevated risk for substance use, risk-taking behavior, and impulsive decisions.

Mental Health Risk Climbs

The lifetime prevalence of any anxiety disorder approaches 32%, and the rate of major depressive disorder roughly doubles between ages 13–14 and 17–18. High school is statistically the highest-risk window for the emergence of clinical mental health concerns. This is not a reason for parental panic — but it is a reason for parental attention.

What the Research Shows Protects Teens in High School

Executive Functioning Skills

Studies have repeatedly found that self-perceived executive functioning skills correlate with school achievement in early adolescence. Skills like planning, organizing, sustaining attention, managing time, and regulating emotion are not optional luxuries for high school — they are the operating system. Teens who arrive at ninth grade with these skills underdeveloped will struggle, regardless of intelligence.

The good news: these are teachable. Executive functioning continues to develop through the mid-twenties. Targeted coaching during the middle-to-high-school transition can substantially shift a teen's trajectory.

Coping and Emotional Regulation

Research on freshman adaptation interventions has found that teaching coping skills, time planning, and self-assessment improves school adaptation. Hope therapy components, which help teens clarify goals and identify pathways toward them, are particularly effective. The throughline: teens who can manage their internal world handle the external demands more effectively.

Strong Family Connection

As teens push for independence, families often pull back. The research suggests this is a mistake. Adolescents who continue to feel deeply connected to their families — even as they renegotiate the terms of that connection — show better mental health and academic outcomes. Connection is not the same as control. The family's job in high school is to remain a safe base from which the teen can launch experiments.

A Mastery Orientation

Teens who approach learning as growth — rather than as proof of worth — fare better in high school's higher-stakes environment. Mastery orientation is partly cultivated, partly modeled, and partly reinforced through how parents, teachers, and coaches respond to grades, mistakes, and effort.

Hope and Goal Clarity

Hope, as defined in the research literature, is not vague optimism. It's the combination of (1) clear goals, (2) the perceived ability to generate pathways toward those goals, and (3) the motivation to walk those pathways. Teens with high hope show better adaptation to high school across multiple domains. Hope, like the other skills above, is teachable.

At Least One Trusted Adult Outside the Family

Research consistently identifies the presence of at least one trusted, non-parental adult — a coach, teacher, mentor, counselor, faith leader, or family friend — as a strong protective factor for adolescents. This adult plays a role parents cannot: a sounding board for the teen's emerging identity, in a context where the teen does not have to perform or protect.

Warning Signs That Warrant Attention

Most teens experience some bumpiness during the high school transition. The following are signs that the bumpiness has become something more, and that professional support may be helpful:

- A sustained drop in academic performance, especially across multiple subjects.
- Persistent statements of self-criticism, hopelessness, worthlessness, or burdensomeness.
- Withdrawal from previously enjoyed activities, friends, or family.

- Significant changes in sleep, appetite, energy, or mood lasting more than two weeks.
- Increasing use of alcohol, marijuana, vaping, or other substances.
- Self-harm of any kind, or any references to wanting to disappear, die, or escape permanently.
- Anxiety severe enough to interfere with attendance, sleep, eating, or daily functioning.
- Disordered eating patterns or significant weight changes.
- Major personality shifts that persist beyond a few weeks.

If you notice any of these, take them seriously. Adolescent mental health concerns respond well to early, skilled intervention. Waiting rarely helps.

Common Parent Questions

“My teen used to talk to me about everything. Now they don’t. Should I be worried?”

Generally, no. Some pulling back is developmentally appropriate. The key is whether your teen is connecting somewhere — to friends, a coach, a teacher, a sibling, a counselor. Total isolation is concerning. Selective sharing is normal.

“How much should I be involved in their academics?”

Less than you probably want, more than they want. The goal is scaffolded autonomy: progressively transferring ownership while remaining a coach. By the end of high school, your teen should be running their own academic life. Ninth grade is where that transition begins in earnest.

“How do I know if this is normal teenage moodiness or something more?”

Duration, intensity, and impairment are the three markers. Normal moodiness shifts within hours or days, doesn’t fundamentally interfere with functioning, and doesn’t carry themes of hopelessness or self-loathing. When in doubt, consult a clinician — that’s what we’re for.

“What if my teen doesn’t want help?”

Most don’t, at first. The research on adolescent therapy is clear: even reluctant teens benefit when the clinical relationship is well-formed. Parents don’t need their teen’s enthusiastic buy-in to bring them in. They need their willingness to come once.

How Momentum Supports This Transition

Momentum is the second tier of the Pathway program, designed for teens entering or already navigating the high school years. It’s built around the protective factors the research identifies as decisive:

- **Executive functioning coaching** — tailored to high school's specific demands, including planning across multi-week projects, managing competing deadlines, organizing materials and digital tools, and regulating attention in the face of constant distraction.
- **Emotional regulation and coping skills** — drawn from evidence-based approaches, equipping teens to manage the heightened emotional load of adolescence without resorting to avoidance, perfectionism, or self-medication.
- **Hope and goal clarification work** — helping teens articulate what they're aiming at, what pathways might get them there, and how to keep walking when the path gets hard.
- **Identity and values exploration** — in a confidential, developmentally calibrated space where the teen does not have to perform for anyone.
- **Parent guidance** — translating what's developmentally happening into the specific parenting practices that protect, connect, and equip without controlling.

Momentum is not therapy for a problem, although for some teens it includes that. For most, it is preparation. It is the set of skills, conversations, and supports that turn the high school years from a survival project into a growth project.

How the Program Works

Momentum is delivered as a structured five-meeting program, beginning with a comprehensive psychological assessment.

Initial Assessment — BASC-3

Before the first meeting, both the student and parents independently complete the BASC-3 (Behavior Assessment System for Children, Third Edition) — a standardized, norm-referenced behavioral assessment used by clinical psychologists. The instrument produces detailed scoring across emotional, behavioral, social, and adaptive domains, and the multi-rater format provides an integrated picture from both perspectives. Results are scored and clinically interpreted before the first meeting and inform every subsequent step of the program.

Meeting 1 — Intake (Student and Parents)

A working meeting with the student and parents together to review the BASC-3 results, discuss the family's specific concerns and goals, and establish the focus for the work ahead. The intake produces a personalized roadmap that guides the three working sessions.

Meetings 2, 3, and 4 — Working Sessions (Student)

Three structured sessions with the student alone, focused on the specific readiness work the assessment and roadmap identified — building the executive function skills high school will demand, equipping emotional regulation and coping strategies, clarifying identity and goals, and preparing the teen for the academic and social terrain of the years ahead.

Meeting 5 — Family Integration

A closing 30–45 minute meeting with the parents and student together to present the personalized recommendations, walk through what was accomplished, align on how the family will support the work going forward, and review a written summary of recommendations the family takes home.

A Final Word for Parents

Parenting an adolescent is, in some ways, the hardest work in the family life cycle. You are tasked with raising someone who is actively becoming someone you don't fully recognize — and doing it without losing them or yourself. There is no formula. There is no perfect.

But there is good research, there is clinical experience, and there is the simple fact that teens who have well-equipped, well-connected, well-loved adults around them tend to do well — even when the years are messy.

If you are wondering whether Momentum might be a fit for your teen and your family, I'd be glad to talk.

Koy Roberts, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist
600 S. Denton Tap Rd. | Coppell, TX
972-922-9624 | drkoyroberts.com

Selected Research

This white paper draws on the peer-reviewed research literature on adolescent transitions, executive functioning, and mental health. Key sources include:

van Tetering, M. A. J., Jolles, J., van der Elst, W., & Jolles, D. D. (2022). School Achievement in Early Adolescence Is Associated With Students' Self-Perceived Executive Functions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 734576.

Evans, D., Borriello, G. A., & Field, A. P. (2018). A Review of the Academic and Psychological Impact of the Transition to Secondary Education. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 1482.

Hall, A. C. G., & DiPerna, J. C. (2017). Childhood social skills as predictors of middle school academic adjustment. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 37(6), 825–851.

Eccles, J. S., & Roeser, R. W. (2011). Schools as developmental contexts during adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21(1), 225–241.