

# THE COUNSELOR

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## Back to School

### The Excitement of Moving On and the Fear of the Unknown

Summer is now over and the new school year is here. Dormant halls and classrooms are buzzing again with students everywhere. "Who do you have for English?" "Where is room 214?" "Are you going out for football?" Questions pour out about all sorts of things. Some students are quiet, and tentative as they make their way to their first class. Others are loud and talkative, cramming in as many conversations as possible as they travel from one class to another. Students' faces reflect a variety of thoughts and emotions as they enter the new school year with excitement, apprehension, fear, and tension. Kids return to school older and bigger. Many begin their transition to a completely different level, progressing to kindergarten, first grade, elementary, middle, or high school. Others embark on the journey to college. Students have an array of conflicting feelings during this time. Many return to school with high expectations and a sense of adventure while others come back feeling tremendous pressure and fear of the unknown. What can teachers, the school, and parents do to facilitate a good transition? How can we promote growth and foster smoother transitions for students? This Newsletter addresses some of the concerns, challenges, and issues, students face as they enter the new school year.

Most children and adolescents meet the new school year with positive expectations and excitement about moving forward with their lives. They may feel a little uncomfortable or tense about dealing with new surroundings, routines, and materials, but for the most part they look forward to making the transition well, once they have settled in. The initial excitement wears off and they get down to the business of learning and developing friendships. Some students get off to a shaky start, beginning a long year of academic and behavioral struggles. They have difficulties making the transition. These students freeze up or avoid assuming the responsibility necessary to succeed at higher levels. Some become disinterested or distracted, while others panic and remain uptight over school work or social situations.

#### *Dynamics*

New environment, rules regulations, routines, procedures, and expectations, signify change. We all resist change. It forces us to make adjustments. Change compels us to face our fears. The transitions from one grade level or school to the next oftentimes means leaving behind the familiar, comfortable, and secure, to face the new and unknown. The change presents new opportunities but can evoke fears of loss. Students fear losing their families, friends, and themselves as they experience a shift from the familiar to the unknown. Every change reminds them that they are in motion, moving forward. They are painfully aware that they are expected to become more independent and responsible. Students with low self-worth and very few successful experiences handling similar changes have trouble making the transition. They obsess about the future. They are afraid of failing, being left behind, and ridiculed by others. They really wonder if they will make it. They fear what could happen. Many returning students see bigger kids, long term assignments, and more school work. They feel intimidated and overwhelmed. Reality sets in. Insecurities are magnified by the perceived insurmountable journey ahead. These students feel defeated from the beginning and their troublesome behavior reflects their dilemma. Uncertainty over the new school year taps their fears of failure. These particular students are prone to experience academic and social problems despite their ability to succeed. Many of these students have average or above intelligence but are emotionally stunted. They feel threatened and shrink back when confronted with change rather than challenged and motivated to press on.

#### *Causes*

A multitude of interacting factors cause some students to be immobilized by fear of the unknown. Immature personality development, enmeshed, strained, or distant parent-child relationships, and intense pressure to achieve are a few factors responsible for students' heightened anxiety. Students stuck at lower levels of psychosocial development are more fearful of failure and success. They haven't experienced the positive effects of their own efforts to achieve. They depend on others to take care of them. Change and movement toward greater independence and responsibility are associated with the pain of separation. Developmental demands for growing up threaten their security. Students with an exaggerated fear of the unknown present two different pictures. The first one arranges for people to rescue them (fear of failure) and the second type gets people to do for them (fear of success). One child looks visibly anxious and fearful while the other appears lazy and unmotivated. Both are terrified about moving forward. Family conflicts, tension and crises adversely affect a student's adjustment. Maturation changes add to the confusion and uncertainty as children enter puberty and teenagers move toward young adulthood. Past failures, developmental delays, ADD, ADHD, and physiological difficulties also create problems for some students. Peer and societal pressure increases students' stress during this time.

#### *Promoting Healthier Transitions*

We need to understand that all students have some reservations about the new school year. Excitement, ambivalence, and nervousness abound during the initial adjustment phase. Expect commotion and uneasiness at all levels, particularly with those students making significant changes. Pay close attention to students entering Kindergarten, first grade, middle school, high school, and college. Teachers and school officials should allow for an adjustment

period in academic performance. Most students get on track by the sixth to eighth week. Do whatever you can to reassure, encourage, and support students through the transition as early as possible.

Help them prepare for the road ahead. Remember that each student faces a multitude of issues and tasks at each developmental stage of his life. His fears, concerns, and behavior may reflect symptoms of an adjustment problem rather than a negative attitude toward you. There are usually underlying issues. Poor school performance is not solely about the grades, it reflects a combination of problems. View students' behavior as a signal, an SOS for attention and help. Involve their parents as much as possible right from the beginning. Develop warm, nurturing, helping relationships with your students. Foster a learning atmosphere of acceptance, one that makes them feel welcomed to come to you for help. Consider employing a buddy system. Assign students of the same sex to come along side apprehensive students and walk them through the routines and help them get used to the new setting. Look for potential mentors in the student's life, people who are older and mature to coach the. This may be more appropriate for high school and college students. Offer structure. Provide a clear set of expectations and steps to achieve tangible goals for each class throughout the school year. Train students as early as possible to learn how to learn, to organize, prepare, set goals, and take small steps toward those goals until a project is completed. This can be done as early as kindergarten and first grade. Evaluate and eliminate external factors which hinder students as quickly as possible.

These stresses may include schedule discrepancies, school bullies, etc. Catch problems early. Openly acknowledge the issue of all student's uneasiness beginning the new year. Consider having short-term support groups focusing on this topic. Discuss your concerns when appropriate with the student's parents. Draw from existing support systems - peers, church groups, and work in tandem with them to facilitate a good transition to the new school year. Identify those students needing professional help and make the referral.

Parents can use many of the suggestions previously listed to help their children meet the new school year. Most importantly, stay connected to your children no matter what their age. Show interest and involvement appropriately to their developmental.

Encourage and praise them for their efforts. Acknowledge their difficulties. Refrain from power struggles over homework and grades. Establish firm limits and opportunities for your children to work their own pace within the boundaries you establish.

## ***F.Y.I.***

I want to inform, stimulate, encourage, inspire and support you as you serve the vital role of guiding our children. Future newsletter will cover healthy parenting; parent-child relationships and school performance; underachievement; single parenting issues; peer relationships; dealing with tragedy; and divorce.

I have considerable experience working with children, adolescents, parent-child relationships, families, men's issues, trauma and crisis counseling. It is a pleasure to serve you. Feel free to contact me anytime for questions, feedback, or input.

We at Christian Counselors of Houston are committed to serving the Church Community and the people of Houston. We are a highly trained and experienced group of mental health professionals here to serve as your major source for counseling services, information, support, seminars and in services.

# **F.Y.I.**

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