# Transition to high school

## Department of Education podcast transcript

Commonly known as the ‘queen of common sense’, Maggie Dent has become one of Australia's favourite parenting authors and educators. She has a particular interest in the early years, adolescence and resilience, and is an undisputed 'boy champion'. Maggie is the author of nine major books, including the bestselling Mothering Our Boys and her 2020 release From Boys to Men. She hosts the award-winning ABC podcast, Parental As Anything and in 2021 released a book of the same name. In May 2022, Maggie released her first book about girls, Girlhood: Raising our little girls to be healthy, happy and heard.

**Announcer:** This is a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

**Student 1:** I was a little worried about starting high school, mainly because of getting to class because I was worried I would get lost.

**Student 2:**  The thing I was worried about entering high school was being unfamiliar with all my teachers, not knowing who they were.

**Student 3:**  I expected high school to be hard and terrifying. I thought I would have heaps of homework and that the teachers and older students would be mean.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** The move from primary school to high school is an education milestone that requires consideration and preparation. Hi, I'm Virginia from the Queensland Department of Education. Today, parenting author, educator and host of the ABC podcast, Parental as Anything, Maggie Dent, joins me to talk about how parents can make the move a little easier.

Hi Maggie. Thanks for joining me. Many of our listeners may have heard you on Parental as Anything or read one of your bestselling parenting books, but could you tell us a little bit more about yourself?

**Maggie Dent:**  I'd love to Virginia. So, I'm a bush kid from the wheatbelt of Western Australia, raised on a farm, wheat/sheep farm. I'm the fifth of 6 kids. And went to the local public school, went to the... I had to board for a couple of years cause it was a bit too far for the next big high school and then went off and trained to be... was heading to do journalism, but ended up doing teaching. So taught off and on for 15 years in and around an intensive breeding program of having 4 sons. And then after that, when I went back, I kind of realized I was pretty good with troubled kids. And so I did a post-grad counselling training and ended up with outside the classroom counselling, training, and education. And that kind of began me working with kids that were struggling and they were little right through too big, and then of course adults came in because there's a child inside them that's still struggling.

And then I started to run some groups because you don't just work with a child, you work with a family. And then I ran some small groups and people said I made a lot of sense. As a former English teacher, I had really not written much for a very long time, just corrected an awful lot of stuff. And then I just had this brilliant idea to turn one of my training manuals for teachers into a book. That's in 2003, and I've now written 9 major ones. So, it was an accidental journey to get to here. But I'm still really deeply passionate about parenting, but also education and counselling because they are 3 of my obviously past lives.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** That's a fabulous career. And 9 books is amazing.

**Maggie Dent:** I know, nuts right?

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Yes.

**Maggie Dent:** Yeah. And what's really interesting is that I can't just write a book because somebody wants me to write one. I mean nobody wanted to touch me for a long time because I was just some nobody from WA. But then there's something that keeps niggling at me because the number of parents who kept saying, I want to know more about this and I want to know more about that. And then when I look at what I've written, cause all those blogs and articles I've written on my website, they're actually chapters for a book. And then I suddenly realise that behind the scenes I've been preparing for the next book without knowing it.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Now, transitioning from primary school to high school is a big step in our education. It's a momentous occasion for most tweens. It's exciting, daunting, and maybe just a little scary. I remember when I was started high school, I was absolutely terrified. We heard some students in the intro talk about their concerns. What are the most common concerns you've heard from students?

**Maggie Dent:** First thing we have to say is that we've stolen a year also off our kids. So they're going into the high school year, a year younger. And that's a big year of development. So, I think we have to factor that in. And the second thing too, we know that today's kids are not as resilient and capable on all sorts of levels. So that transition now has actually become much more of a challenge than it was you know, in previous like 20 years ago before we did that. Even when I was teaching, I used to always check in with my year. They were Year 8s then, of course, and now they're Year 7s. What's worrying you? And some of the common things were getting lost, losing stuff, getting changed in front of others for Phys Ed and things that really bothered a lot of them, they're very conscious about that, getting bullied, meeting awful people. And then that whole thing of, oh my God, it's now going to be dumped on me. High school's going to be so hard and there's not going to be any fun. And then there was one other one that crept in a lot, parents stressing about how they're doing. So, what are their grades? So, they just felt it was just this, like you went off a cliff and dived into something you didn't know quite what was going on. And so really that's the you know, that’s the fear of the unknown.

And I think one of the biggest you know, recommendations we have for children you know, preparing for any major transition, changing schools, you know, having a new baby in the house, moving house, anything. All change triggers stress. Anxiety is absolutely normal in this window. And I think acknowledging that it's going to be wobbly for a while is a great thing for all kids. Even your most confident kids are going to feel wobbly because until it becomes predictable, then our amygdala's going to keep on saying, oh my gosh, oh my gosh. And I think we have to factor in too that some of our tweens in that window are a little more developed, so already some of their synaptic pruning is happening. So that's the brain pruning that the brain will do and they can get more forgetful and more disorganised for a patch of that window. So, imagine transitioning into a high school environment instead of one classroom, one main teacher. You've got classrooms all over the place with different teachers who all do it differently and interpret rules differently and have expectations that are different, with a brain that's just being pruned, that's not quite as reliable as it might have been before. No wonder, no wonder they can experience you know, challenging moments.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** When you put it like that. It actually is amazing that everyone survives it.

**Maggie Dent:** And I think that's what we have to keep saying. It's a really wobbly time that most of us can gradually get a little bit more competent and confident at knowing roughly what's going to happen. They'll still lose their backpack and they'll still lose their top or whatever, they'll still forget stuff really. They really will because they're tweens and teens. However, what's coming isn't quite so unknown. So that amygdala will settle down and they'll start to anticipate things that are fairly predictable.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And are there some obvious or easy things that parents can do to help their child feel at ease?

**Maggie Dent:** Yeah, a couple of really big ones. And that is we keep reassuring them it's going to be wobbly. That's the very first one. We don't oversell high school either. I've noticed a lot of parents who want to tell it's going to the most amazing time of your... Oh, no. Don't oversell it. No. Let them work that one out.

It's also, what other things can I have prepared? What can we prepare? Rather than always a parent doing it, what can we get ready the night before? Cause there's no question that the less decisions they have to make between the time their eyes open to the time they turn up to their first classroom, the more energy their body will have for the learning process, and also just to cope with the daily stress. So, night before needs to be a regular habit of I've got everything. I actually still recommend a box. I had forgetful boys, so they each had a box. And the night before we double checked the shoes, the socks, the gear, the shirts was right there. Most of the stuff was ready by their bag because I didn't want that nagging voice in the morning. It just needs to be a habit. The more prep we are, the less we have to do the morning of. It's a good habit.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** It's a good life skill really, isn't it?

**Maggie Dent:** Oh, totally for life. The second one that came up a lot is what if I get lost? And what if I don't know where the toilets are? What if I, and those sorts of things is about, you know, the schools will give them, if they haven't had the orientation, the school will give them a map. We need to sit down to double check each of their classes when they get them. How far is it? Where is it near the canteen? Where is it near the area that they're able to hang out. So that it's not this, oh my god, I need to go, where is it? I think it's those simple things like that that we keep on affirming them. We'd love them to remember their timetable. Apparently now most of them are digital and so many kids have a smartphone at school or you know, an iPad. But I still think it's good to have a hard copy and may that hard copy be on your fridge. Because that not only does it show where you got to go, it’s actually sometimes you might have the reluctant math student. And so every now and then you just might be checking in to see if the homework might have... What day was that due? You know, just that little, not nagging, but kind of going, I know it's easy to forget things. How can we support you without being a naggy parent?

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And maybe do it in the car when they can’t see your face.

**Maggie Dent:** Absolutely.

**Maggie Dent:** Totally. Another one in that window. They’re very you know, they're biologically wired to develop these relationships with peers and friends. But it's tricky. It is. It's very tricky. If they haven't got a friend already, that is one of the biggest things that will create distress. And I think the conversation with your kid, if they don't have a friend immediately is we know the things that they love to do, whether it's robotics, it's football, it's art, dancing, music, whatever it is. We need to be able to work with them to be able to create an opportunity to do say something in that area with kids from the same school. So, we are increasing the chances of them finding a like-minded friend. Because as soon as you've got somebody whose face lights up when you get there, it's so important that window.

And also I think be prepared for a lot of dramas in the girl area because it's a much more complex process of alliances and groups and things that go down in that area. And I think parents need to be mindful of just being able to hear the little sparks and flames that happen with girl friendships and know that you don't step in until you have a really big fire because they need to work those things out because this is exactly, every time they have one of those moments, they're learning another lesson in how we navigate them rather than always having a parent has to fix them. And if you go in and try and fix it, you can make it worse and they won't ever come to you when there is a big, big distress in their lives.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** So, what you're saying is that relationships between girls can be a little bit more complex?

**Maggie Dent:** Absolutely.

**Maggie Dent:**  Especially in that window. And the other thing we know from the science and the research, sometimes their intensity, their emotional responses are far more intense and last more longer than are boys. And that's not a sign that there's something wrong. It's a sign that they're dealing with the environment they're in, which is a bit tricky. Boys once again, don't tend to necessarily vent things, but that can feel like an alien sometimes might have stolen your son because he is not that communicative friendly little boy. But he's going through the stuff in a unique kind of gender way. And then there's everything in between.

And I also want to mention that we've got to keep in mind that I believe every student is trying to navigate the journey as best they can. And so some of our neurodivergent students are not deliberately making poor choices, they're trying to regulate themselves in environments that aren't always that receptive. It's a big one because stress triggers sometimes impulsive behaviour. We have a responsibility, we'd have conversations about it, but I am going to challenge us again to say most of the time punishing them without necessarily doing what called discipline, which is... “That's really not okay. If that comes up again, what's something else you might do instead of that?” So we do the teaching and the guiding. And I think when parents and our educators are on that same page in high school, we can make some really big shifts.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** So, I just want to go back to punishing them without what we call discipline. Can you just explain a little bit about what you mean by that?

**Maggie Dent:** In a lot of our school systems, we're still deeply embedded into behaviourism, which says the principle is carrot and stick. When you do well, we reward you and praise you. And when you don't, we punish you. And that means we're going to create some form of fear and harm around your behaviour. What the science of child development shows really clearly now that works really well with rats. And while there is some temporary compliance using that, it doesn't always change the behaviour in a meaningful and long-term way. And that is what we recommend is there has to be consequences absolutely. However, the consequences and also where are we doing the teachable bit around the edges?

And one of the common examples is so often boys who are disruptive may be needing to move more in that classroom. So they move in ways that because they're trying to create dopamine to stay engaged instead of seeing that as a naughty boy, so therefore I'm going to restrict their recess cause that's when they have fun. When in actual fact the recess is what discharges the cortisol, which helps them become more settled in our classroom, so they're easy to teach afterwards. So that punishment doesn't lead to a change in behaviour and you'll think that either the child's not doing the right thing or the teacher, but in the end of the day when you look through the neuroscience, we're actually working with neurochemicals and the stress hormone cortisol. And I think when you change that lens. So what can we do? And the number one thing of course is the safer that any student feels in the classroom, the better their behaviour and the better their learning.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** And is that related to the notion of expectations?

**Maggie Dent:** Yes and no, I think. We know that the higher positive expectations we hold for all students, the more likely they are going to come to that. Whereas if we hold and sometimes, many hold unfortunately quite negative and low expectations for boys. We don't give them that opportunity to grow to that place. So I think it's important in any of those environments to encourage our kids to keep on having a go, even if it's not their favourite subject or if they you know, can struggle to master whatever it might be.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** It's a really tricky time for students moving from primary school to high school. So, there's a lot as a parent we need to consider and maybe make a bit of allowances for?

**Maggie Dent:** Oh, I think with the big one is if you recognise that adolescence is a time of heightened stress, regardless of whether they're in those later years of primary or secondary. And that what are we doing in our home environment that doesn't contribute to more stress? I think that's probably been my big passion. When we're helping them master stress in healthy and constructive ways, then we're helping them you know, transition into school. We're helping them be better learners. So when I started recognising in my classrooms that I could lower the stress, one of the things that I discovered was I was observing my classrooms and realised probably sometimes the noisiest person was me trying to get their attention. Way back then I introduced the silent sound signal when I put my hand up and when students saw it, they were put their hand up and quietened down. And I remember a Maths teacher saying to me, oh, that's not going to work with Year 9 boys. And what I discovered is the boys who get yelled at the most are Year 9 boys. They were glad not to be yelled at. And it was also some sort of respectful way of getting their attention.

I think in a home environment, recognising there are days they're going to come in and they're grumpy and they're tired and often the safest person they might want to vent that out or dump that is whoever that safe parent is in that house. It's often mum. Our job is to restore them. It's to give them the safe basis to give them something nutritious after school. It's not to add to the stress. Kids often don't want to talk about what happens. So don't interrogate them necessarily. It might come out just as you're ready to go to bed. They might come out and tell you something that's when you want to go to sleep, and that's just often when they want to talk.

And also creating the structures around home. So if they have homework regularly, where are they doing it? Is it in a space that's not going to be they're on their phone, on all their social apps or gaming instead of doing their homework? I'm just going to say that when parents recognise the stress levels, they come alongside much more differently because it can look like disrespectful behaviour, it can look like they're choosing it. And so often today's teens are living with much higher levels of stress than we ever did. And if you can come with some gestures of kindness at times it can make a world of difference.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** That sounds like good advice.

**Maggie Dent:** And it can work. And I know sometimes people say, isn't that accepting poor behaviour? And I go, that's only if it's deliberately chosen with an intention to hurt. And I'm going to challenge you that most teenage angst in the home environment is just in response to the challenges that they're living in.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Yeah, they're very, very stressful times.

**Maggie Dent:** Unbelievable. And then I think the other thing too is we can overload what they do after school. So we do know, and the research is quite strong, that some extracurricular activity can definitely be beneficial for the growth and development of your child. But when I see students at any level of high school who have got commitments every afternoon and some of them two things on an afternoon, I'm deeply concerned about how much energy is left to get home and eat a healthy meal, do their homework, do some study, and get to bed and sleep well. That worries me because that's exactly how the stress can creep up.

And another thing I think we need to have conversations with our kids about is how do you help your brain work well, right? Because when I started bringing that into my classrooms, kids started to really understand if they don't get a good night's sleep, their brain's not going to function as well the next day. Not only does it not process the learning that they've had during that day, it doesn't create new spaces for new learning for the next day. So it's like turning up with a brain that's like a motel with no vacancies. So it can't take in any learning the next day, no matter how hard they try. And that can frustrate them in the classroom. The second one, dehydrated brains. We know that when it's dehydrated doesn't have enough water, it can go fuzzy. And so often kids don't drink water, right? They go to something that's going to give them a kick. No, the only thing that hydrates us is water. We do know that there are certain foods that are much better for the brain. So anything high sugar and high processed, even though we think it's going to give us a kick, often give us a kick, but it gives you a crash.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** So as a parent, I guess what we can do is provide a home environment, one that's organised, one that's as stress-free as it can be when you've got people and children running everywhere and provide a good example.

**Maggie Dent:**  It would be good if we...

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Well, we can't all do that all the time, obviously.

**Maggie Dent:** No, no. And I've got... Yeah. And I think I did some things that, because really this whole calmness of the nervous system was something I started looking at so easily. And what I recognised was just lowering the tone of our voice often lowers the tone of their voice and whatever that tone may be. I also found that when I use terms of endearment when I was speaking with my boys, and it works with girls as well, you know, it changes the command demand energy that there were options, so if it's their turn to do a dishwasher. the way that I help, because when we command and demand of anybody, even a toddler, there's a natural tendency to push back. Nobody likes being told what to do.

When we give some agency, particularly in adolescence, because this is that growth and development of my choices, I need to have some say. If you say as they come in, it's your turn to do the dishwasher tonight, do you want to do it now or just before dinner? You have given an option. I think it's those little shifts in our communication style makes such a difference in a home environment even though every now and then we're going to lose it and say, “do the dishes”. I've never met a boy or a girl who's wanted to do it immediately. However, when it comes around to the time, it's already a part of their awareness and they were requested to do it gently and respectfully.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** What happens if a child seems overly concerned about the transition to high school and you've tried everything? When is it time to get professional help?

**Maggie Dent:** That's a really good question because often you don't always see the signs. We know that intentional self-harm has increased incredibly in the last 5 years. Particularly catapulted with COVID and the pressures of it. They often don't want to come and tell you either. If you want to really find some ideas about what signs might show that my child's struggling with what we call unhealthy anxiety, because there's healthy anxiety, which helps me you know, get out of bed every day. We need cortisol to get out of bed. We need it to be able to fire us up for a test because it helps us be hyper-focused. It helps the brain remember. But when it's that one, any change in behaviour that's significant for a couple of weeks that wasn't before. So have they had changes in their eating habits? Are they changing? Are they still struggling to get to sleep? Has that moodiness become kind of even deeper and darker? There's lots of little things you go, um. Trust your gut instinct. There's no question that parents have a better idea. I think a good place to start to is, “I seem to notice that you seem to be struggling a bit more than usual. Is there anything that might be going on?”

Especially if you've got that transition window, that 4 to 6 weeks can be... Usually by about Easter, kids have really kind of either hit their straps or they're really needing some support. The first thing I'd check in with is student services team year coordinator. And I often want to check in with them sometimes if there's no friendship stuff so we can actually get a bit of, oh, I didn't realize. They look like they're fine. Looks like they get on with everyone. So sometimes getting in touch with the school and having a conversation can really help build bridges both ways. But if you're concerned, you want to double check how are they at school? What's their behaviour at school? Is this just at home? So once again, get some more information and then go on to one of the main sites that and you know, are out there that support our teens to double check any of those other characteristics. A couple of them, the Brave program has a beautiful quiz on there that's really handy for them to recognise, “am I struggling?” And then we can work together with them and go, okay, so let's look at some things that we might do that might be helpful around that. So we do some you know, shall we take up yoga together? Shall we go for a walk a bit more often? Because we know fresh air is deceptively fantastic for calming people down. You know, what else is bothering and causing you anxiety online? Is there some unpleasant stuff going on in your socials?

All of those sorts of things, we need to find out what is under that. Because sometimes for me it's they’re struggling with one class, regardless if they can't understand it or they're missing it, or the teacher's a shouty teacher and they're not used to it or they just don't feel good in that classroom. That is enough to then overload lots of other stuff. And we can get into really dark ruminating loops. Particularly girls, we’re much better at ruminating loops. So ruminating loops feed the big ugly feelings for us and we often can't get out of them. So sometimes being able to find out what is the biggest challenge right now? Is it actually at school? Is it here cause your brother might be annoying the hell out of you? If we can get right under it and have a little look at that and say, okay, so how can we bring that? If it's a family issue, let's bring it to a family meeting and see what steps we can do as a family. So have their say and have everyone be heard. If it's a school one, we just double check in to see there's not something going on there and try and problem solve. It's really difficult to get to see counsellors and things at the moment, but we really want them to. If your gut instinct says that, go to your GP, they'll do a health assessment, their mental health assessment, and then they sometimes can refer us and get ahead of the game.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** Oh, that's wonderful advice.

**Maggie Dent:** Another thing that's probably not helpful is even though we think let's be open and transparent about my journey, if you had any disastrous ones in that window, please don't share it till about Year 11. Right? Because it's not helpful.

**Virginia Bowdidge:**  Yeah.

**Maggie Dent:** Because if you've got a worrier worry is going to put that right in and I'm going to wait for that to happen. And so even though you think it might be great to know that I struggled, nah, just leave it till after a couple of years in before you might share that because that can distort it unfortunately.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** That's good advice cause I think that we have a tendency to try to make people feel more comfortable by saying what we've gone through.

**Maggie Dent:** And I think one other thing is that high school isn't just about our grades. I think that's a really important message because even the brightest of our kids are going to have times the test results aren't what they wanted. You are not just a brain on a seat. And what good high schools do is help to shape the child within. And that's why we do subjects in different areas. That's why we offer options where you can grow and be excited by things you didn't even know about and that it's a journey and that there will be ups and downs in all journeys. However, we want you to be a part of something that's bigger than us. Look for the positives. Focus on your favourite class. Focus on your favourite option. If you have to bring home that clay mug that we can't lift up, that goes sideways, we're going to love it just as much. That it's more than just tests and grades. It's more about helping you discover who you are in ways they give opportunities for that to go, wow, I didn't know I'm interested in quantum physics or, wow, wasn't that cooking class great? Do you see? So there's so much more going on and I think we need to encourage them that that's a part of this big jumpy journey.

**Virginia Bowdidge:** I thank you Maggie. That's some wonderful advice you've given us there. Thanks for your time.

**Maggie Dent:** Thank you Virginia.

**Student 1:** What I love about high school is having full access to basketball courts.

**Student 2:** One of the things I liked about starting high school was meeting new friends and teachers and being a part of a new community.

**Student 1:** My favourite subject of high school is science cause I get to do lots of practical experiments.

**Student 3:** My first day of high school was just like every other school day. Nothing like I expected. It was just different teachers and classes.

**Announcer:** You have been listening to a Queensland Department of Education podcast.

The Department of Education acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands from across Queensland. We pay our respects to the elders past and present for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.