

# My Son Is Getting Lost in His Huge High School

## Q: My Son Is Getting Lost in His Huge High School

**It's a natural instinct: When your child begins to stray off the path toward graduation, you chase after him and hold his hand. But this is not what a teen with ADHD needs. Here, learn how to provide him a useful map and the freedom to explore, get lost, and find his way again.**

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**Q:** “My 15 year-old son has been inattentive since third grade and does not take medication for his diagnosed attention deficit disorder ([ADHD or ADD](#)). He also has some executive function issues as well. He is intelligent, but even with a 504 plan, he has always received Bs, Cs, Ds and the occasional A if he's really interested in a class. He is a sophomore and is becoming more disinterested in school; he says he does not see the point of it. He also says he has no homework or tests when he actually does. He is in a strong, competitive high school with 1,000 kids per class. How do we convey how important school is for his future? He stopped seeing a therapist in 6th grade. To us, it seemed more social for him, but it gave him (and us) few coping strategies for school. We will do anything to help him and we are very worried.” —*IllinoisMom*

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Dear IllinoisMom:

I have a nickname for teens like your son: The Bare Minimums. That's because they make time for Netflix, [video games](#), sports, and friends, but only do the minimum required to squeak by in school.

Your son may fall short of causing 'trouble,' but his actions still cause you grief and consternation. His behavior is confusing. Your son may seem unmoved by academic pressure, but his negative reaction is a direct response to the stress he is experiencing. He may seem lazy, but in reality, he is [struggling](#), and feels incapable of meeting the demands of high school. And so, in the face of pressure that seems unbearable, he chooses to opt-out of the competition altogether. This is why I also call these teens “opt-outs.”

### **Don't Push the Importance of School**

You ask, “How do we convey to him that school is important for his future?” There are three reasons why this strategy will not help.

- First of all, he already knows it.
- Second, three years into the future seems like a lifetime to a teenager.
- Finally, by now he is too good at avoiding things that make him anxious.

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## Learn to Step Back

Too often, parents think that if they work harder at parenting, their kids will work harder in school. But the opposite is true: the more involved you get, the less he does. You will only end up worrying about his grades more than he does, which is obviously not the intended goal.

To help your son become motivated, you must take a step back. This means giving him the freedom to make his own decisions and live with the results. This is the only way he will learn from his mistakes. Parents often rush in to rescue teens from the consequences of their poor choices. This only teaches them to expect a bail out. It's hard to see your son make mistakes or fail, especially when the stakes seem so high. It's better, though, to have him flounder now rather than when he is on his own at college.

## Don't Be a Rescuer

Here are some rationalizations parents use to convince themselves that their teens need to be rescued:

- "I only want the best for my child."
- "I can't let my child fall behind."
- "It's so much easier (takes less time) if I just do it."

In order to become a no-rescue parent, you will have to wrestle with the following questions:

- "What is on the line for me if my child does not perform well?"
- "What if my child turns in homework with errors in it?"
- "What kind of parent would I be if my child failed to play well, get good grades, etc.?"

My advice? Follow the edict that less is more. The less you push, plead, and nag, the sooner your son will take responsibility for his own work ethic. However, let me be clear: I do not advocate allowing your teen to dig himself into a hole so deep that he can't get out. Limits and consequences are still necessary. Your teen needs structure; he doesn't need you trying to control him.

## Ways You Can Help

- Tell your son what grades you expect from him. Work with him to come up with reasonable targets.
- Spell out the restrictions you will impose if his grades miss the mark. These limits should be the natural consequence of getting poor grades.

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- In other words: “In order to bring up your grades, you will need more time to study. No video games until we see an improvement.”

Then step back and let him figure out how to do better. Provide any help he requests, but don't constantly check up with him, or look at his grades online every day.

I encourage you to reconsider medication and therapy. Your son might get more out of therapy now that he is older. Keep in mind, though, that therapists don't have tools or immediate solutions for every problem. We can teach coping strategies, but therapy is also a process of self-discovery that can help adolescents mature and develop their own goals.

These developments do not happen overnight. It takes time to help teens see that change is in their best interest. You know the old joke: “How many therapists does it take to screw in a lightbulb? One, but the light bulb has to want to change.” Make sure you find someone who really understands ADHD. If you have not done so within the last three years, a psychological evaluation might also be in order.

## **Make School Feel Smaller**

Unfortunately, your son's educational environment might not be conducive to his success. It is easy for a teenager with ADHD to get lost in a big school. If there are no other options, perhaps there is a way to make the school smaller for your son. For example, find a teacher or counselor who is willing to meet with him occasionally, and help him navigate the complexities of a big and bustling institution. This ally may be a club advisor, guidance counselor, or coach. 504 plans become less effective in high school, but many have structured study halls where kids can get extra help.

And remember: You need the compassion to understand that the problem lies not solely with your son, but rather with a world that asks so much of a boy who will eventually get there, but needs more time.

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<https://www.additudemag.com/my-son-is-struggling-in-high-school-adhd-teens/>