

Strategies to support students preparing for the HSC

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HSC - Hoping, Succeeding, Celebrating!

Supporting your HSC young person is an incredible challenge for every family. During times of stress and challenge it is important to build capacity, resilience, and hope in our young people. These strategies will help our young people to build skills to manage their time, maintain and grow their wellbeing, and be successful with making good decisions for academic and future life success.

Getting to the finish line

Many parents and caregivers feel like they too are in the most competitive high stakes event with their teenager hurdling towards the HSC and hoping for ATAR glory. It is a breathless, gut-wrenching battle to get to the finish line. You are at times a spectator, willing your teenager's success or a coach timing their efforts and getting them moving. These challenges can be addressed if as parents and caregivers we adopt a growth mindset and start to work on strategies with our young people to build future success, resilience, and hopefulness. We need to re-position what the HSC means to all of us and maybe start to see it as journey of "Hoping, Succeeding and Celebrating!"

How do I help my teenager with study?

Teenagers often feel overwhelmed by the amount and time pressures of study. Their normal support peer networks have changed during COVID-19 with online and remote learning. As parents we can often feel we cannot contribute to the content or knowledge areas our teenagers are struggling with, but we can use our skills in goal setting, meeting deadlines, and time management to really help out. Getting your teenager to write down tasks for each day in a student diary, whiteboard, or Google calendar is an important step. We can build in reward and chill out time into this schedule, and assist our teenagers to see how chunks of productive study gives them a sense of success and enables rewards to be enjoyed.

A great tip is to discuss what they really like to do with their time, what they must do with their time, when tasks needs to be finished by, and how long they think each task will take. You can start with a daily schedule or even map it out per week leading up to the HSC. Seems simple and practical, but it works. Studies by Adams & Blair (2019) show us if your teenager can manage their time and have an academic work and life balance, they achieve higher marks or grades in their subjects. It works because it buffers student stress and anxiety at the critical point in time and also builds stronger academic success for future study and work.

The “Write” way to academic success.

One of the simplest strategies to help with HSC study is through writing. Did you know that writing helps young people to comprehend, select information and store the knowledge in long-term memory? It also helps encode and retrieve information from long-term memory, and the more often we practise this skill, the faster and more efficient the retrieval process is. What this means is that if young people handwrite notes, key terms, practice answers and summarize some content, their ability to remember and apply that information under examination pressure is significantly improved. It helps them to retrieve information faster and removes the strain on their working memory under test conditions. While colourful highlighting is often the preferred choice for many teenagers, or adding to google docs is easy, handwriting these notes is more effective. According to Mueller and Oppenheimer (2014), students who used handwriting performed much better than students who had taken notes on a digital device. If you drill down little you find that the richer the summary notes or better practice attempts improve performance a little more too (Morehead, et al., 2019). Another tip is that handwritten notes that are revised (added to) outperform other techniques such as cramming, underlining or annotating (Brown et al., 2014).

How can I build my child's resilience for the HSC?

The HSC is an event. It is a moment in time and that does not define us. Our young people at this time can be hypersensitive to criticism and high expectations from us as parents and caregivers. Despite their preference for peer interaction and social media, teenagers really care about what we think as parents and caregivers (Butterfield et al., 2020). It's important to give them a sense of what the real expectation is that we have for them; we want them to do their best, not necessarily get the ATAR of their dreams; we want them to feel like they have achieved success by getting through, rather than worrying if they have not learnt that final quote for English or formula for Mathematics. We do care that they prepare, but we respect their choice and judgment about what is good preparation and when they feel they have learnt and consolidated a topic or concept. Teenagers need to see how they have some choice and control over their success and become intrinsically motivated to achieve their own goals rather than worrying about the ATAR or HSC mark they think we want for them. We also need to share stories of our own successes and sometimes failures and what we learnt from this. Creating each new goal for this one moment of the HSC will help our young people to tangibly see the next opportunities and move towards these next experiences. Recognising that failure is sometimes part of the success can help young people to build this resilience.



Dealing with difficult moments and distractions

Deliberative procrastination is often a behaviour that HSC young people excel in. There is social media, gaming, Netflix, and facetime absorbing their interest and time. Negotiating the distractions can be challenging. Some tips include discussing how each distraction can take 20 minutes to re-group and reconnect with the task. We can help teenagers to build in social media time into their day as a priority, and then have open conversations about checking into social media after tasks, phone free zones or hours, and creating spaces that are comfortable, low noise and well set up for study. Ideally another room with a bench or desk space or even outdoor areas that students can access with wi-fi.

When dealing with the melt-downs try and stay calm and see this a normal setback. Over 40% of teenagers at this time can feel very distressed or even depressed or anxious. Your teenager may be negative, lethargic or a little more irritable. We need to avoid reacting and understand their pressures. If our young person is increasingly showing these signs, then help from others such as Headspace, Reach Out and Beyond Blue can really be important.

- <https://headspace.org.au>
- <https://au.reachout.com/>
- <https://www.beyondblue.org.au>

Creating safe and stable routines around teenagers' priorities and needs such as sleeping, eating, and socialising is important and can help to avoid the difficult moments or get us all back on track. So, agree on a wake-time time and the wind-down time. Making some time to share a quick lunch or coffee break with young people between study periods is a great tip and helps with connection and checking in on their wellbeing and sense of progress or mastery of a topic. Finally, it may be good to have a chat about how much sleep a teenager really needs- 9-10 hours per day. Give your teenager a reason to be asleep until 9am.

How can we create hopefulness in the HSC year?

The HSC can be a sign for hope. Hope that it could bring an opportunity to go to TAFE, get a new job, attend university or achieve a long held career goal. For others it could be a hope for some freedom from study, from routine. It is also an important rite of passage that signals the end of schooling and should be celebrated as a significant achievement for all families and communities.

Beyond the HSC

The HSC allows our young people to do amazing things beyond the school years. Today there are so many pathways to future careers and work opportunities. One way to focus on the journey beyond the HSC is to be informed and help your teenager navigate this space.

Good links to check out are:

University information for HSC students (NSW Department of Education)

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/stay-healthy-hsc/resources/university-information-for-HSC-students>

Special Program for most impacted HSC students (NSW Department of Education)

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/stay-healthy-hsc/resources/news-special-program-for-most-impacted-HSC-students>

After the HSC, there are many options (NSW Department of Education)

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/stay-healthy-hsc/resources/after-the-hsc-there-are-many-options>

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