

RUSHEY MEAD ACADEMY



Top Tips for Secondary Success.

How to help your child make a fabulous start to their five years at Rushey Mead Academy.

Many of us still remember our first day at secondary school. It is an important moment in a child's life and one where much emotional energy is invested - both theirs and yours!

Here are some simple tips to help it go well: -

- Avoid last minute stresses and panics by getting uniform and equipment well in advance. Label every item clearly. In school it can be very hard to distinguish between identical grey blazers without clear name-tags!
- Boost confidence in the run up to the first day. Giving out lots of positive messages about why it will be OK, and how proud you are of them, will help in a small way to reinforce their confidence. Even normally self-confident children often feel fragile at this point.
- Be very positive about the process and give a clear message that although there may be ups and downs, it WILL be OK. Rushey is a school where staff work hard to make sure that ALL students are safe and happy. If there are ever problems, as long as they talk about them to somebody, they will be sorted out.
- Encourage them to talk to you or a family member about any worries or anxieties that they may have. Perhaps share those you or older brothers and sisters had on starting secondary school, as a way of opening communication.

During the first week: -

- Make sure they eat a good breakfast - nerves may mean that they don't feel hungry, but an empty stomach certainly won't help them later on in the morning. If they really can't eat much, send them in with a healthy snack. Don't forget to pack a water bottle. Drinking regularly during the day is very important. Bottles can be re-filled at water fountains in school at breaks and lunch times.
- For the first week, but particularly after the first day, expect your child to be exhausted. There is SO much to take in. So much nervous energy is used up meeting new people and getting used to new routines. Often students look a little shell-shocked by the time they get home. This is normal, and they will soon relax into a routine, feel less tired, and look less stressed. However, it *is* a good idea to have little or nothing planned for evenings in the first couple of weeks.
- A great deal of care is taken placing students in forms where they will be happy and learn well. Occasionally, in the first few days, a small number of students feel that they're not settling in to their new form. This is a normal reaction to so much being new and different and them feeling less secure that they did in their primary classes. It almost always passes as they make friends in their new groups and settle in. Do wait a while before accepting any claim that 'they have no friends' in their new class. Tutors work hard to help people get to know each other and are aware where students have come from schools where few other pupils transfer. They will go the extra mile to make sure friendships are formed.
- It is normal to get very little feedback from some students as to how their day has been. As they move towards the teenage years, some choose to communicate less and less with their parents and more and more with their friends. This is a natural development which should not necessarily concern you. Lack of communication or enthusiasm does not automatically mean that things are going badly. However, it is important to do all you can to keep lines of communication open. Do keep asking questions, even if answers are brief!

The following are good questions to ask, rather than just 'How was your day'?

- What was the highlight of your day? (Don't accept that there wasn't one – *something* must have been better than the rest!)
- What did you do at break-time?
- What homework do you have?
- Tell me something new that you learned today?
- Which lesson did you learn most in?
- Which subject did you put your hand up in? Why?

New Routines - Positive habits

The start of secondary school marks a completely new phase in your child's life. It is a good point to bring in new routines. There will never be another chance as good as this to lay down positive habits. Any time invested now will pay back many times over in the future. Whilst it is never **easy** to set good habits, it is certainly easier to set good habits in year 7 than it is to **break** bad habits when they are in year 10!

Organisation

It's tempting to see secondary school as the beginning of students being independent and doing things for themselves. However, at least in the early stages, most students will need help with this. It is a big change needing a different set of books and equipment every day. Initially many children struggle to adjust.

- Print out a timetable and pin it up somewhere at home on display
- Encourage a set routine each evening, which involves checking the contents of the bag against the timetable for the next day. In time, students will start to do this automatically, but for the first few weeks it is a good idea to nudge them in order to embed the habit. Or you could set an alert on their phone to remind them to check each evening.
- Make sure their pencil case is stocked with pencils, pens (blue or black and coloured) a ruler, calculator, compass, protractor and glue stick)

Homework

At RMA we have worked hard over the last few years to make sure that all the homework we set really helps students' achievement. We have looked at much research into the best forms of work to set as homework. Tasks are never set 'for the sake of setting homework'. This will mean that amounts vary slightly from one week to the next, but should never be excessive.

- All Homework at RMA is set via the homework app 'Show My Homework'.
- Please make sure that your child has downloaded the app onto his/her phone if he/she has one.
- If not, discuss how he/she will access information about homework each night.
- This could be via a tablet, laptop or desktop computer (Show My Homework has a website as well as an app). There is no expectation that students will own a mobile phone
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- Many parents find that it is helpful to also download the app to their own phones so that they are aware of what has been set. We would strongly encourage this as a way to support your child and to positively monitor their work at home

As with organisation, it is tempting to imagine that students will be able to manage their own homework now they are at secondary school. The truth is that most students will need some level of support during year 7.

- Establish clear expectations from the start about where and when homework will be completed.
- These will vary from family to family. An attitude of 'a quick break, then homework comes first' is a helpful habit to set.
- Once children have settled down with games consoles, or gone out to play football with their mates it can be hard to pin them down. As a result, homework can be rushed or completed badly because they are tired.
- Some parents also find it is helpful, in the early stages, to encourage children to work downstairs. In that way they are available to help, and can see that their child is engaged and producing work to the best of their ability. Once again, this is about setting positive habits and expectations right from the start.

If a homework deadline is missed in school, parents will be alerted by text message. This is to enable you to have a conversation straight away about what went wrong. We want to help you to sort out little 'blips' before they become embedded problems.

Alongside homework, there is one *leisure* activity that is proven to increase academic achievement and that is reading. Many children tend to read less as they move into their teens. This is a great shame - both for the loss of such a wonderful enriching habit as well as for losing out on the boost to their achievement. We have an amazing library at RMA - please encourage your son or daughter to use it. Some parents set an expectation that their child reads for a time each night before bed. This is an excellent way to unwind and encourages good sleep habits.

Phones and Social Media

Many students will have a mobile for the first time in year 7 with the transition to secondary school. This opens up a world of possibilities for children but sadly not all of them positive.

- Many parents find that it is helpful to set out rules for use from the outset, with clearly understood sanctions for breaking the rules. It is much easier to discuss these calmly before there is a problem that to try and impose them later.
- Almost invariably parents are paying the phone bill - and this certainly gives them rights, over and above their obvious responsibility as parents.
- It is normal, healthy and to be expected that parents have the right to view messages their child is sending/receiving on their phone.
- Putting anything on the internet is the equivalent of standing in the middle of the playground and shouting it loudly (even with Snapchat and its disappearing messages, things can still easily be caught and kept) - so refusing to share with parents because 'it is private' holds little water as an argument...
- We would encourage parents to look at your child's phone regularly. Make sure that you always know the password!
- Schools find that social media is the cause of much unhappiness amongst young people. It can cause anxiety and acute unhappiness amongst teens. Parents who don't monitor the messages that their child is receiving are often the last to realise how unhappy their child is - and the reasons behind that unhappiness.
- We want all of our students to thrive. That means getting the right balance of social media and 'Real Life' interactions - and knowing when to turn their phones off.
- It is a great idea to sit down with your son or daughter during the holiday and to discuss what your rules will be.
- Many parents find a 'parental control' app such as Ourpact can be very helpful. It is definitely much easier to install it now, right from the beginning. These apps allow parents to control Internet use. Parents can turn off all Internet based apps at the press of a button on their own phone. At their most basic level of use, many of them are free. There is a small month fee for more advanced/flexible usage. One way in which they are useful is that they mean a parent can easily turn the Internet 'off' on a phone when their child goes to bed. Many parents are unaware that their children are contacting friends on their phone well into the night, when their parents imagine they are asleep!

Which brings us nicely to the importance of sleep...

Sleep

Sleep is very important for both health and for learning. Children often try and use 'now I'm at secondary school' to try and negotiate later bedtimes. The scientific evidence is strong; children aged 11-13 need on average 9-11 hours' sleep. Even moderate lack of sleep leads to: -

- Low concentration
- Irritability,
- Mood swings
- Anxiety
- Clumsiness
- Poor immunity to illnesses

Over time, it increases the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, and diabetes. So all in all, probably a good idea to help them get enough sleep!

One key fact to be aware of - all electronic screens emit a blue light that interferes with production of melatonin (the sleep hormone). This means that if we use screens - phones, games consoles, computers, in the run-up to bedtime, we may find it hard to fall asleep even though our bodies and minds are tired.

There are two ways to avoid this: -

- The simple one is to avoid screen use before bedtime!
- If this seems unappealing then Apple products have a 'night shift' mode which takes the blue light out of the display (easy to apply in 'settings') and other computers can download a free app called F.lux, which does the same for desktops/laptops/tablets.

Learning Habits

In recent years there has been much research into the science of learning. This has told us in far more depth how the brain takes in and retains information. As a school we base as much of our work as we can on research proven techniques. It is clear from our GCSE results that science doesn't lie!

We all understand the basic 'old fashioned' learning habits that help us to learn: -

- Arrive on time
- Sit where you won't be distracted by chatty friends
- Focus on what the teacher is saying.
- Answer as many questions as you can (answer in your head if the teacher doesn't choose you - the act of doing so is proven to reinforce learning)
- Try your hardest with written work
- Revise properly for tests
- Do homework well - don't just 'get it done'...

These all matter - adopting positive habits in all of these areas is definitely the first step to academic success in secondary school.

However, we now know more about how to make our teaching more effective because we understand in greater depth how the brain works.

Some key facts: -

- In order to retain information, the brain needs to make sense of it - so an idea that is not understood will not be remembered. Understanding is very important for remembering. It gives the brain links and allows it to fit new information into the model of what it already understand about a given subject. Those links help it to stick
- The brain retains new material better when it is in 'effort' mode - so when it is having to do 'hard' things. If it is doing low-level effort activities such as just reading a text, it will retain very little of what it covers.
- The single most effective 'effort' mode is something called 'Retrieval Practice'. This basically means testing yourself - or answering questions (see 'answer in your head' above!). This forces the brain to think hard to remember - and creates links in the brain. So it turns out the old chestnut 'read-cover-write-check' was based in hard science!
- However, the nature of our memories means that if you just learn material once, however well you learn it, it will soon be forgotten (This is illustrated by the Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve for those of you who may be interested in reading further)
- The way to push material from the short term memory, into the long term, 'forever memory', is to revisit it with longer and longer gaps between visits and re-test yourself on each occasion (more Retrieval Practice!) This is called 'Spaced Learning'
- Over time, this will move the material more and more securely into our brains, until we are stuck with it for life :-)

We have organised our curriculum and planned our lessons in the light of these facts. Lessons feature lots of Retrieval Practice in various formats. Topics are re-visited and re-tested cumulatively.

- We share these facts with you, so that you understand why, for example, Hegarty online maths homework will include some work on past topics alongside current topics. Equally, so that you are in a position to be able to actively support at home. Now you know that the most effective way to revise and you understand that topics will need to be revisited over time, for example a week later, a month later, a term later... to move them into your child's 'forever memory'.

Language

One final essential learning habit that underpins all subjects is that students hear and see as much English as possible at home. Students' ability to understand and to communicate well in English is essential for success in all GCSE subjects. Many students at RMA speak languages other than English as their first language. This is an excellent skill to have, and something we celebrate within school.

Some points to note: -

- If your child is struggling to understand the teacher because English is not their first language, it is important that they speak to the teacher concerned. They could speak to their tutor if they are not confident enough to have that conversation with the subject teacher. In most instances staff will already be aware where there may be issues of this nature – but it is still always better to say something, just in case
- At home, we hope you will support us. We understand that students will naturally wish to communicate in their first language some of the time at home. We ask that you do everything you can to encourage them to devote SOME time at home to conversation in English, or at the very least to watching English language television. Obviously reading in English is also an excellent habit to embed as we mentioned earlier!
- For students who are at early stages of learning English the following websites offer excellent support for language learning: -

learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org
learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org
grammarly.com
youglish.com
dopeoplsay.com
freerice.com
rewordify.com
cambridgeenglish.org

- We ask that you strongly encourage your child to spend some time using the activities that they offer. Making good progress at school is dependent on how well you can speak and understand English. The sooner language skills develop, the sooner they can 'fly' in the classroom.

MORE than just academic success...

Finally, our ambitions for your child do not begin and end with academic success. Each child has more talents than those which are examined in GCSEs. We aim to develop the whole child.

We sum up our aims in **The Rushey Way 1-2-3**

1 Be kind - we aim to develop respectful, tolerant students who are kind to everyone.

2 Work hard - we promote resilience and initiative as qualities to be admired and rewarded, at school, as they will be in life.

3 Develop your whole self - we want students to develop more than just academic excellence whilst they are at RMA. We want them to use their leadership skills, sporting talent, musical or dramatic ability, raise money for charity, challenge themselves on the Duke of Edinburgh scheme. All of these develop a whole range of skills, which will help both to find rewarding jobs and to thrive more generally in later life.

We offer a WIDE range of clubs at RMA - tutors will introduce students to the full list for this academic year (dependent on staffing) via a Clubs Fair in the first weeks of term, but to give you a taste here is last year's list. Do encourage your son or daughter to join up. Clubs are free, a great way to make new friends - and of course to discover talents they didn't know they had!