



Graduating Kindergartner Ryan Lenzahan

Graduates of the Nurtury Preschool at Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church celebrate

## School Transitions—Exciting and Scary at the Same Time

By Andrea A. Firth

It is graduation time, and students across Lamorinda are preparing for ceremonies and celebrations to mark their passage from one phase of learning to the next. Whether it is the bump from preschool to elementary school or the big move from high school to living and studying away at college, school transitions are challenging steps at every age.

**Preschool to Elementary:** “Children in preschool do feel the stress of moving on to kindergarten,” states Dot Feist, who has been the Director of Joyful Beginnings Preschool in Lafayette for the past twenty years. Although the curriculum for preschool children has evolved to be more focused on reading and cognitive skills, strong self-esteem and socialization are the essential elements for success in kindergarten, according to Feist. “Kindergarten requires children to be more self-directed,” she explains. “If the child is not socially and emotionally ready for kindergarten it will hinder his ability to learn.”

**5th Grade to Middle School:** The transition to middle school in sixth grade represents the onset of the individuation process where children start to separate from their parents, according to Heidi Felt, counselor at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School (JM). “It’s a conflicting time,” says Felt. “These students are caught be-

tween childhood and adulthood. They struggle between wanting to be independent and still needing their parents.”

For sixth graders, Felt recommends that parents stay involved with checking homework and managing school progress. “We live under this false impression that if we give a middle school student an organizational planner and couple of binders that they will be organized,” she says. “The task of organization is often greater than their ability. And let’s face it, most adolescents are resistant to adult advice.”

Felt suggests that parents slow down and explain things on a very basic level. It may be helpful for the parent to model behavior for the child. For example, if the child refuses to ask a teacher for help, the parent should have the child watch and listen as the parent contacts the teacher to request assistance.

“The goal of middle school is learning how to learn,” says Felt. “That includes learning how to be organized, use time well, plan for long-term assignments and tests, employ resources, and ask for help.

**8th Grade to High School:** Irene Coleman, a marriage and family therapist with a practice in Lafayette, encourages parents and students to view the transition from eighth grade

to high school as an opportunity to re-evaluate what is and isn’t working in their lives. “It’s a time to shape where you are going and to set goals,” advises Coleman. “Students at this age have less resiliency as social groups shift and academic pressure increases.”

One of Coleman’s key recommendations to new high school students to help them to achieve success in ninth grade is to get enough sleep. “A study from the University of Minnesota has shown that high school students require 9 ¼ hours of sleep daily for their brains to function optimally,” states Coleman. She recommends allowing children to catch up on sleep at the weekends. “It’s better than having them function at a deficit all the time,” she explains.

**12th Grade to College:** In the time between high school graduation and the first week of college, most students experience a mixed bag of emotions. “Anxiety may be the predominant emotion,” states Kayla Banion, the Interim Director of New Student and Family Programs at Saint Mary’s College in Moraga. “College freshman are excited but nervous about fitting in and meeting expectations,” she adds.

One of the most challenging aspects of the transition to college for most students is re-evaluating how to

find community. Having left the safety of their high school friends, college students must start over in a new setting. “The first year of college is such a transition period. There are so many things that can happen academically, socially, and spiritually,” says Banion.

In addition to taking advantage of the many orientation programs and resources available at college campuses and websites, Banion recommends that parents and students clearly establish expectations for things such as grades, phone calls home, and spending money well before departing for school. “It is a good idea to revisit these expectations after the first semester to see what is working and what needs refinement,” she says.

**Easing the Transition:** “The most important intervention that a parent can provide to help ease a child’s transition [to a new school setting] is reassurance,” states Felt of JM. “Letting your child know that you believe that he or she will succeed both academically and socially in the next phase of school is important.” Counselors and advisors at every school level recommend providing students with as much exposure to a new school as possible.

**If Problems Arise:** Easing the transition to the next phase of school does not guarantee that problems with academic performance and social integration will not occur. “Be proactive with your child’s teachers. Establish a healthy relationship with the teacher from the beginning,” says Felt. This will make working with the teacher easier if the student needs help with academic or social problems. “If something feels different, then it is,” advises Banion from SMC. “Parents know their children.” She recommends that parents maintain an open dialogue with their child and to ask directly if they feel something is wrong.

**In the End:** As your child walks down the aisle this week to collect her diploma, and the tears begin to well in your eyes as you feel (along with her) deep pride in her accomplishments, the hope and promise of the future, and all the anxiety that goes with it, feel confident that with a bit of reassurance and your help along the way she will be just fine.