



ASK Jane

Q: Dear Jane,

I've heard about JPA's 9th Gear Mentoring program from a student who went through it and liked it. I have an 8th grader who's shy and even a little fearful about being thrown in with older kids from different neighborhoods when it's time for 9th grade. What do you mean by "mentoring" and how would a mentoring experience in the summer before high school help my child?

A. Madre

A: Dear Ms. Madre,

"Mentoring" brings experienced, caring adults together with young men and women who need positive, friendly guidance to help them on the road to successful lives. Our 9th Gear mentoring program grew from recognizing that moving from middle school to high school is a critical time in a child's life and development — time deserving additional support and attention.

This transition is a significant change from the familiar to the unfamiliar, which can often cause anxiety and self-doubt. Students worry about harder high school work, whether they'll have

friends, whether they'll play on a team, or even whom they'll sit with at lunch. Having been the oldest as 8th graders, becoming lowly freshmen with lots of older kids around can be especially nerve-wracking. 9th Gear gives young teens space to express their feelings about this transition, showing them what to expect and how to deal with it while letting them know they're not alone.

9th Gear is an experiential, relationship-based program where teens connect with new peers and adults who come from similar and different backgrounds. Through weekly group activities and several field trips in the summer before 9th grade, young teens make friends from around the city and connect with caring adults who give them space to talk about topics that affect them. Each meeting is fun and active, although each serves a purpose; 9th Gear director Erin Vanden Brook says, "Every piece of JPA mentoring is designed through a clinical lens."

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Through thoughtfully planned activities and groupings with peers and mentors, as well as individualized support, 9th Gear builds capacity for the social-emotional challenges of high school. Activities help create confidence, encourage self-exploration, and give young people the feeling they can succeed in their new environment. Teens have the opportunity to process their feelings about going to high school and ask questions of former mentees/current high schoolers. In this safe space, they can explore their anxieties and get support.

We individualize the program, accepting each mentee where he or she is developmentally. Although we do meet as a whole for some activities, each mentor/mentee group has two mentors and only two or three mentees. This arrangement creates a setting where shy or fearful teens are better able to build confidence, develop relationships, and find their own voices. Encouraged to be open about their concerns for freshman year, they're often surprised to learn others have the same fears. Discussions can become animated and extremely helpful, with students themselves offering potential approaches as mentors guide from the sidelines. Coupled with games and other social activities, these weekly meetings become high points for our mentees.

Volunteer mentors are carefully chosen and trained by JPA professional staff to recognize and address the issues that may come up during meetings. These adults provide positive role modeling as well as careful non-judgmental guidance for their mentees. Our mentors report that

they derive great satisfaction from being part of 9th Gear.

Several of our weekly sessions also have separate meetings for parents who'd like to learn more about the transition from middle to high school. Parent workshops cover topics that occur during many of the group mentoring sessions, because not only is this a big transition for your teen, it's a big transition for you, too.

If you're interested in having your child participate in 9th Gear or in being a mentor, please contact [Erin Vanden Brook](#).

Most Sincerely,

Jane

JPA

