THRIVE EMERGE

When the Road Through High School Stops Looking Familiar

By Dr. Rick Silver

I was talking recently with a mother of a high school student, and as she spoke, I could hear something deeper than frustration in her voice. It wasn't just that her child was struggling with schoolwork, or motivation, or getting out the door in the morning. It was fear. The kind of fear that builds quietly over time when your child is approaching adulthood and the road ahead looks less and less clear.

She said, in so many words, "I thought by now we would have a better sense of where this was going."

That sentence stayed with me.

Because for many parents, high school is supposed to feel like a gradual movement toward independence. Yes, there are bumps. Yes, adolescence is messy. But underneath it all, there is usually an assumption that things are moving forward in a recognizable way. Better habits. More maturity. More ownership. A growing sense that a young person is preparing to step into adult life.

But for many of the families I work with, that is not how it feels.

Instead, high school can begin to feel like a pressure cooker. The academic demands increase. Executive functioning challenges become more costly. Social struggles become more painful. Emotional regulation gets tested again and again. And the safety net that once existed in childhood starts to thin out just as the stakes are getting higher.

Parents begin to ask themselves questions they never imagined asking with this much urgency:

Will my child be able to manage college?
Will they be able to hold a job?
Will they ever become independent?
What happens if they don't?
How hard do I push?
How much do I step back?
And how do I help without making things worse?

These are not abstract questions. They are heavy, deeply personal questions. And for parents of neurodivergent teenagers, they often arrive long before there are satisfying answers.

The mother I was speaking with described a familiar kind of whiplash. There were moments when her child seemed bright, capable, insightful, even remarkably mature.

And then there were moments when everything seemed to collapse: unfinished assignments, emotional shutdowns, avoidance, conflict, exhaustion, and a level of overwhelm that neither of them seemed able to control.

That contrast is one of the hardest things for parents to live with.

Because when you can see your child's intelligence, their sensitivity, their potential, it becomes even more confusing when they cannot seem to access those strengths consistently. Parents start to wonder whether their child is unwilling, unmotivated, or simply unprepared. And underneath those questions is often a quieter, more painful one: *What if they are not going to be ready for what comes next?*

That fear is real.

But what I said to this mother, and what I say to many parents, is that readiness for adulthood does not always develop in the neat, linear way we were taught to expect. Especially for neurodivergent kids, growth is often uneven. A teenager may be highly articulate and deeply thoughtful, but unable to manage deadlines. They may understand themselves in profound ways, yet still melt down under demands that other people assume are simple. They may desperately want independence and at the same time feel terrified of everything it seems to require.

That does not mean they are failing.

And it does not mean the future is closed.

What it does mean is that we have to think more carefully about what development actually looks like. We have to stop assuming that age alone tells us what a young person should be able to do. We have to become better observers of the gap between intelligence and execution, between desire and capacity, between potential and current functioning.

Most importantly, we have to resist the temptation to panic.

Because panic narrows our vision. Panic makes parents feel they must force maturity into existence. Panic turns every missed assignment, every late start, every conflict about responsibility into evidence that disaster is coming. And once that happens, the relationship between parent and child often begins to carry more fear than trust.

What this mother needed, more than another lecture about consequences or another reminder about deadlines, was permission to see her child more fully.

Not as a failing version of a typical high school student, but as a young person whose path toward adulthood may require a different pace, a different structure, and a different understanding of success.

That does not mean lowering expectations into the ground. It means making them realistic, humane, and growth-oriented.

Adulthood is not a single leap. It is a long transition. And for many teenagers, especially those with neurodivergent profiles, that transition is less about suddenly becoming independent and more about gradually building the capacities that make independence possible: self-awareness, frustration tolerance, problem-solving, emotional recovery, self-advocacy, and the ability to accept support without shame.

Those are not small things. In fact, they are some of the most important things.

So when a parent tells me they are scared, I understand. High school has a way of making the future feel immediate and unforgiving. Graduation looms. Other kids seem to be launching. Everyone starts talking about college, jobs, and "the real world," as though adulthood is a train leaving the station and your child is either on it or left behind.

But that is not the truth.

The truth is that many young people grow into adult stability later than expected. Many need more scaffolding, more trial and error, more recovery time, more relational support. Many do not move in straight lines. And many ultimately do find their footing, not because they were forced into someone else's timeline, but because the adults around them stayed steady enough to help them build a path that actually fit.

That is what I wanted this mother to hold onto.

Her child was not a lost cause. Her fear, while understandable, was not the full story. There was growth happening, even if it did not look like the kind of growth schools reward or relatives easily recognize. There was a self emerging. There was learning happening through struggle. There was still movement, even if it was slower, messier, and more uncertain than she had hoped.

And perhaps most importantly, her child did not need a perfect parent.

They needed a parent who could stay engaged without collapsing into despair. A parent who could look beneath the behavior. A parent who could remain hopeful without becoming unrealistic. A parent who could say, in effect, "We do not have every answer right now. But I am not giving up on you, and I am not going to let fear define how I see you."

That kind of steadiness matters.

Because when the road through high school stops looking familiar, it is easy for families to feel as though they have lost their way. But sometimes the task is not to get back onto the expected road.

Sometimes the task is to recognize that your child is on a different road -- one that may take longer, require more support, and ask more of everyone involved -- but is still, very much, a road forward.

And if we can hold onto that, then even in the uncertainty, something important becomes possible:

Not just survival.
Not just getting through.
But the beginning of a path into adulthood that is honest, sustainable, and truly their own.