

Helping Kids Cope With Change

These days the subject of stress is often discussed, and parents worry that their children are suffering from it. In looking for causes, it can be easy to overlook the great impact of change on children. In fact, we adults often overlook the impacts of change on ourselves. Any kind of change brings with it some degree of stress, and change can impact on children even when they are very young. Parents can take steps to help their children cope with change in the short-term, and so prepare them to meet the inevitable changes in life in the longer-term.

Examples Of Change

The changes your child (and you) may have to face are many. They include:

- moving house;
- a death in the family;
- starting school or preschool;
- separation or divorce;
- a friend moving away;
- a new baby in the family;
- illness;
- a parent losing a job or taking a new job;
- new childcare arrangements;
- different financial circumstances.

Simply growing up involves its own changes, which become far more obvious at adolescence.

The Stress Of Change

Whatever the change, even if it is positive, it means some measure of stress. Some changes are more dramatic and difficult than others, and sometimes several changes can happen at once. During such times of crisis, stress-levels can soar.

Children Sensitive To Change

Even change that seems insignificant to adults can have its impact on children, especially some who are more sensitive to changes. Partly because of temperament, some children will react more strongly to change than others. For example, changing the layout of a child's bedroom may seem a small thing to a parent, but for a child who finds change particularly difficult, it can be unsettling and even disturbing. Imagine the impact on such a child, then, when the change means greater upheaval.

Recognising Reactions To Change

Some behaviour may clearly indicate that your child is finding it hard to cope with change, and some children find it easier to protest openly about it. But be aware of responses that are not so obvious. A child who has become withdrawn, or has a loss of appetite, or is suffering sleep problems, may be struggling with change in their lives.

Building Resilience

Learning early to cope with change is a skill that will benefit your child for all their life. Resilience is a quality we would all like our children to have: it means that they are able to face difficult situations and then can bounce back afterwards. A child will tend to develop resilience if they have at least one supportive adult to listen well to them and to guide them; if they have good social skills; a good sense of themselves; the ability to focus; and a sense of independence and autonomy.

What You Can Do

Building a close relationship with your child, while allowing them to develop in their own way, provides a great foundation. When a child knows they can turn to someone to express how they feel, and that there is at least one adult who cares about what is going on, they will tend to feel more secure, even when great changes are going on. Let your child know about your own past experiences: the changes you have been through and how you managed them. Tell them what you might have done differently that would have helped. Tell them about changes within the wider family, how other members of the family manage with changing circumstances. Stories from grandparents about the adversities they've face and how they overcame them will provide a family history and also offer role modelling for those times of difficult change.

Do seek help if the change feels overwhelming either to you or your child. Your family and friends can provide invaluable support, and ask your medical practitioner, or school counsellor, or any other professional who can provide help.

Some Tips

- Look out for children's books about change: changing seasons; changes within the family; moving house; a new baby.
- When you are out and about, comment on the changes that are going on around you: the trees losing their leaves during Autumn, the soft green of Spring's new growth. The seasons provide a good natural example of the cycles of change.
- Tell stories about changes you've lived through yourself; invite other members of the family - grandparents, aunts and uncles - to tell stories too.
- Talk about your own feelings about the changes. This will help your child to process their feelings.
- Particularly if the change is great, make sure to hold on to some familiar objects and routines, and establish as much order as you can, such as eating meals at regular times, having a specific time for bedtime.
- Reinforce the positive aspects of the change without diminishing your child's fears about it.
- Avoid telling your child about a change at the last moment. Give them time to adjust, to ask questions, to be involved in some way.

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