

Helping Children Deal with Change

Overview

Ways to help your child develop the coping skills to handle change throughout life.

- How change affects children
- Helping your child deal with change
- Other resources

One of the most important skills you can help your child develop is the ability to deal with change. There are everyday changes all children face, such as adjusting to a new babysitter or school, or to new teachers and friends. Many children must face bigger changes as well, following a loss, a move, or a divorce in the family. All change, whether it's the end of the school year, the birth of a sibling, or a move to a new installation, brings some sadness and uncertainty as well as anticipation and excitement. You can help your child develop the skills to handle change by understanding your child's needs and by offering encouragement and support.

How change affects children

Most children like routine. Adjusting to a new school, new child care, new friends, or a change in the family can be difficult. All children, like all adults, react differently to change. One child may be affected for months when a best friend moves away while another child may adapt quickly to this change. Many children adapt easily to a new school, taking the changes and challenges in stride. Many other children show signs of anxiety and stress. How your child adapts to change will depend on his temperament, personality, and your family's circumstances. During times of change your child may be:

- clingy
- moody or irritable
- angry
- sad
- anxious
- afraid
- less sociable than usual

Younger children may regress or take a step backward in behavior during times of change. For example, a child may wet the bed again or go back to playing with toys she outgrew months ago. These behaviors generally disappear as your child adjusts to the change. You can help by being aware of what your child is feeling and by recognizing that reactions like these are normal. Talk with your child about what she is feeling and be a good listener. Offer extra love, encouragement, and support during this time.

Adjusting to a big change following a death, divorce, or a family move can be difficult and can take more time. If after a month or so your child seems to be having trouble adjusting to a big change at home or at school, consider talking with a professional. Your school psychologist, guidance counselor, pediatrician, or installation family support or community service center staff can help you find resources and support. Military OneSource can also help.

Helping your child deal with change

Here are some ways you can help your child prepare for and handle change:

- *Do what you can to be available during times of transition and change.* For example, if your child has a hard time at the beginning or end of the school year, try to be more available during these times. Do what you can to simplify your family life so that you can focus on your child's needs.
- *Talk about the change.* Talk about what will happen and what the change will mean for all of you. For example, if you will be moving to a new installation, talk about how hard that is, how fun it is, and what to expect. Answer as many of your child's questions as you can, such as how long the move will take, how far your new home is from school, and what you know about the school and town.
- *Acknowledge your child's worries and fears.* Allow your child to feel angry, sad, and confused during times of change. These feelings are normal and your child needs to be allowed to express them. Acknowledge your child's feelings and respond sympathetically. You might say, "Yes, saying goodbye to a friend is really hard. That makes me feel sad, too." Be sure to let your child know that you take his concerns seriously. For example, you can say, "Are you worried about going to a new school? I used to worry about that when I was your age, too," or "I know you miss your old friends from last year. It's hard when things change."
- *Help your child prepare for the move to a new school or town.* If your child is going to a new school, visit the school before the first day of class, get a copy of the school newspaper, or go online and look at the school's Web site together with your child. Try to help your child meet new teachers and staff before the start of school. If you will be moving out of town, try to visit your new neighborhood with your child before you move so your child is familiar with her new surroundings.
- *Involve your child in decisions about the change.* For example, if the change involves a move, let your child choose colors for his new bedroom and arrange his things when you move in. When starting a new school or a new school year, let your child choose what to wear on the first day and to pick out his school supplies. Children typically have no control over the major changes in their lives. By involving and including your child in such decisions, you help him feel more in control of the changes in his life.

3 • Helping Children Deal with Change

- *Help your child mark the change.* If your child's best friend is moving away, help your child mark the occasion with a card, a gift, or a special event. Keep farewells and goodbyes simple and low key.
- *Maintain family routines.* Knowing what to expect helps your child feel grounded and secure, especially during times of transition. Maintain family routines around bedtime, TV, and family meals as much as possible.
- *Try to keep other changes in your child's life to a minimum during times of transition.* For example, if you are going through a big change at home, this is not the time to send your child to a new camp or new after-school program.
- *Expect that a child who had difficulty in the past with transitions may need extra support during times of change.*
- *Talk with your child's teacher or child care provider about changes going on in your family life.*
- *Make sure your child eats well, gets plenty of exercise, and gets enough sleep.* The healthier and better rested a child feels, the easier it is to withstand everyday stress and to handle change. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children get 9 to 11 hours of sleep each night.
- *Encourage your child to write about worries in a journal.*
- *Show your child the positive ways that you handle change.* Talk about how you feel during times of change and about what you do to cope. For example, let your child see the lists you make to help you stay organized and focused.
- *Have a positive attitude.* If you are confident about an upcoming change, your child will be positive, too.

Other resources

Resources are available to help support your family as you face the challenges of change. They include the following:

Military Student

www.militarystudent.dod.mil

Provides information and resources for military families to support them through the changes associated with deployment, relocation, and other transitions in military life.

Military Teens on the Move

www.defenselink.mil/mtom

Provides support for both children and teenagers experiencing changes associated with all stages of a military move.

Your installation's support services

Depending on your service branch, your Fleet and Family Support Center, Marine Corps Community Services, Airman and Family Readiness Center, or Army Community Service Center can help you make the transition to your new community.

Military OneSource

This free 24-hour service, provided by the Department of Defense, is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members and their families. Consultants provide information and make referrals on a wide range of issues. You can reach the program by telephone at 1-800-342-9647 or through the Web site at *www.militaryonesource.com*.