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# Helping Children Make Changes: Big and Small

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For all of us, changes or "transitions" are the stuff of everyday life. Whether it's going from home to work, taking your child to [child care](#) every day, or even a bigger change such as moving to another home - life is full of changes, some good and some not so good.

Your children's growth and [development](#) can be helped if they have routines and know what to expect in their daily lives. Knowing what to expect gives children a sense of security, a feeling of safety, and it helps them to handle their stress better. As a [parent](#) or [child care provider](#), when you provide structure and routines in your children's lives, things tend to run smoother for everyone. Providing children with daily structure and routines helps build their selfconfidence. And self confidence is a key ingredient in the ability to handle change.

## Handling the Day to Day Changes

Think about how you handle change. Do you like surprises? Would you rather know what will happen ahead of time? Children are no different than adults in this respect. Some children, and grownups, handle change more easily than others. All children are different and you need to look at their personalities, ages, and experiences when you are considering how to help them make adjustments. Regardless of individual differences, there are some basic strategies that are useful to most parents and [child care providers](#) for helping children deal with change.

## Infants and Toddlers

For infants and toddlers, it's all about familiarity. It is already hard for these young ones to figure out their world and to know who and what they can rely on, especially if the people in their lives are constantly changing. But there are many ways to help them, including:

- **Developing routines or rituals:** Daily routines are always good practice for toddlers, as well as older children. For example, the sequence of eating with the family, taking a bath, and going to bed are all typical daily life activities that children can look forward to as part of their special routines. In daily life activities, children appreciate knowing they can expect certain things to take place at certain times. [Consistency](#) is a key to children's healthy [development](#). Specific examples of consistent routines for children are:
  - Being held and sung to after feeding or at naptime;
  - Washing and dressing before eating breakfast;
  - Helping choose the clothes they will wear each morning;
  - Taking a nap at specific times;
  - Reading a book with a parent.

- **Nice and slow...the gentle approach:** When approaching transitions or changes, it is a good idea to take the gentle approach and to do things in steps if possible. As an example, if you know that your child has a difficult time with goodbyes when you drop her off in childcare, work with your provider to come up with strategies to ease this transition. In this case, you could try:
  - Spending at least 10-15 minutes with your child before leaving;
  - Developing a quick, fun ritual that you and your child share when you arrive (so that your child looks forward to going); and
  - Letting your child know when you are going to leave. You should never just disappear without saying goodbye. Reassure her you will pick her up at a specific time. "After nap, you have snack, then you play, then Mommy will pick you up."
- **Signs of change:** Having cues or clues that children can see or hear or touch to let them know change is coming is often useful in child care settings. Here are some ways to help signal children about a transition at home as well
  - Sing a song, play music, or ring a chime to give children time to go from one activity to the other.
  - Give a couple of "warnings"- at the 10 minute mark, and 3 minute mark - to help them prepare for a transition.
- **Transition or comfort objects:** Young children typically go through a period where they like to carry around or sleep with a "lovey," "blankie," or comfort object that help them feel secure. If your child already has one, that's a good thing. Not all children have comfort objects; some children "use" their parents for this purpose. Whether or not your child has a comfort object at home, if your child goes to child care, it is a good idea that they have objects in that setting that are familiar and comforting to them. These are some favorites:
  - Family pictures;
  - special toy or stuffed animal;
  - specific place for their belongings;
  - favorite blanket for naptime.

## Preschoolers

Preschoolers are a lot like toddlers. They like specific routines and enjoy doing things the same way each time. Adjusting to transitions between activities often plays a big role in behavior issues for some young children. They need time to switch from one activity to another. When things change suddenly, children are apt to throw tantrums or struggle against the change.

What is recommended for toddlers is also appropriate for preschoolers, but here are some things that child care providers can do that will help preschoolers deal with that "between activity" time:

- **Lessen waiting time:** Do not have young children stand in lines or wait for transitions. Keep short activities, rhymes and songs ready to use to help them with waiting.
- **Use cues:** Use songs, music or bells as alerts for what is coming. This lets them know to prepare for 'change'. Cues work well for parents at home too.

Preschoolers have also reached the age where they've started to face bigger transitions. At this age, you can use books or stories to prepare preschoolers for life's many changes. There

are books on almost any subject that you may find helpful if you're expecting a change. Some examples are: moving away, the arrival of a new baby in the family, going to kindergarten or elementary school, saying goodbye to old friends, and so on.

## **School Aged**

By the time children start school (kindergarten), have already learned to deal with some fairly big changes in their lives. However, these adjustments and changes can still be stressful for them.

At this point in their young lives, the best thing to do is respect their developing intelligence and give them a chance to have some input. Here are some strategies for helping older children cope with change:

- Involve them in decisions that effect them when possible;
- Plan ahead and give more them detail as needed; and
- Listen to their fears and concerns; accept their feelings.

Listening and working with your child to conquer their fears and worries can be a growing experience for your child - and sometimes, you'll surprise yourself with what you, too, can learn.

## **What About the Big Changes?**

Handling the big changes requires the same steps and planning as the small changes do. Some big changes come suddenly or unexpectedly, such as death or weather-related events. Some changes are less devastating, but can still cause your child to experience stress. These changes can include:

- Going from preschool or child care to kindergarten;
- Moving to a new home;
- Making new friends;
- Saying goodbye to old friends; or
- Going back to school after summer - and starting a new grade.

Breaking things down into steps for gradual change is best, when possible. For sudden changes, make sure you are available to talk with your children and help them remain calm and assured that they are safe and will be okay.

The bottom line is that how you cope with big changes will determine how well children handle changes. You are, of course, their role model. For all children, no matter what their age, they will need time, support and love as they adjust to changes.

## **What If I Need More Help?**

Some children require more help than others in making adjustments. Personalities, temperaments, life experiences, and developmental levels all play a role in how well children are able to adjust. If your child requires more than the usual strategies, or you're just not sure what to do, you should always seek help from others.

The good news is that there are many outside resources that can help with emotional trauma or other stressors that may be too much for some children to handle. You can always talk to your pediatrician, child care providers or teachers to let them know what concerns you have regarding your child and get their expert advice.

### For More Information

- **ZERO TO THREE:** Features information on just about every question parents have on children, aged infant to toddler. (202) 638-1144.
- **[www.csefel.uiuc.edu](http://www.csefel.uiuc.edu)** Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning is a national center focused on strengthening the capacity of child care and Head Start programs to improve the social and emotional outcomes of young children. (217) 333-4123 or (877) 275-3227.
- **The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)** website features information for families, as well as educators. (800) 424-2460.

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