

# Preparing young children for change...

By Felicity Moore

Preparing kids for change, whether its a holiday or moving house, first day of school, a new baby, or even death, is difficult. We recently moved house and with three small children (aged 3, 2 and 8 months) this usually frenetic time was ratcheted up to manic levels.

Packing boxes, organizing cleaners, and planning for the utilities to be transferred are just a few of the myriad tasks faced by families moving house. As a mostly stay-at-home mum I had three kids to care for while taking care of all these jobs. Argh!

Having navigated my way through the choppy waters of moving house, I have some practical tips that should help you chart your own course to safe waters, rather than winding up in the rapids of the proverbial creek in a barbed wire canoe without a paddle.

Here are my tips for helping kids cope with change:

1. **Warning:** Give your child plenty of notice that change is coming. The amount of time depends on the child's age. For example, telling a three-year-old that you'll be going on holiday in six months is not really going to stick. However, telling your three-year-old about a week before you bring home boxes that you're moving house will give them ample opportunity to absorb the information. Try and look at it from their point of view, too. A colleague took her young family on holiday to Bribie Island and her then-three-year-old was upset at bedtime and unable to settle. She eventually got this from him: Mum, whose house are we in and when are they coming back? It became clear to her she perhaps didn't do enough prep work before embarking on the holiday!
2. **Details:** Explain the intricacies of the forthcoming change. If moving house, tell them, we'll be putting all our things in boxes and someone will take them to our new house. The level of detail depends on the child's age.
3. **Reading:** For young children there are books that deal with such things. If moving house, try reading *The Berenstain Bears Moving Day!*
4. **Get them involved:** Give them a box and ask them to put some toys and books into the box to go to the new house.
5. **Experienced friend:** Find other children your child knows who have moved house and draw on their experience. Perhaps have them over for a play date and bring up the topic while everyone is in the car, directing questions and positive input from the experienced friend.
6. **Routine:** Keep as much of their routine intact as possible. Swimming classes, gymnastics classes, regular play dates and so on, should all be kept. Keep things as normal as possible.
7. **Advance screening:** If possible, visit the new house ahead of time and tell your kids this is where you will be living soon. Note: only if the house is vacant. If it is still occupied it could overcomplicate the situation when your child asks about the people still living there.
8. **For those with teenagers,** point out the positives of the new place ... bigger bedroom, bigger backyard, closer to Jimmy's place (or other friend), handy to the cinema/shopping centre/pool. Anything. (Cheaper rent means an increase in pocket money!). It's important to get a positive spin happening early, to give it time to sink in.
9. **With primary school-aged children** who are nervous about making new school friends, point out that just as they made friends at their current school, they'll make new friends at their new school. Let them know they are wonderful friend material and soon the kids at the new school/neighborhood will see that and want to become friends.
10. **Security blankets:** child psychologists eschew the idea of security blankets however I believe they do have a place and a big change such as moving house warrants. Keep something familiar close by, whether it's a favorite toy, book, shirt, cup or plate. The security of routine, of

the familiar is tantamount to children and some have a more difficult time than others adjusting to change.

For those parents with more than one child, the difficulty may be recognizing different symptoms in different children. Right after the boxes appeared in our house, my eldest started wetting his pants again, despite having mastered the toileting process quite competently for many months. With my middle child, however, he exhibited above-average clingy behavior, accompanied by whining and a general "I want you, Mommy" cry. The pants-wetting was out of character for my eldest, while the excessive clinginess was an amplification of an existing behavior for son number two. Both, I believe, were symptoms of unsettled feelings surrounding our house move.

Something I think is important, as soon as the boxes arrive, get busy setting up your children's bedroom(s). Return them to regular routine as quickly as possible to firmly root them in the new reality.

Some children thrive on change and for these kids routine is boring. Moving house, going on holiday, a new baby... all these things are positive and invigorating. But for young children, the majority prefer routine to major upheaval and when those inevitable life-altering events come along they need some guidance and support in coping well with the changes they bring.

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