



by Karen Stephens

Moving Day: Helping Children Adjust to a New Home

Childhood changes vary from one developmental stage to another. Whatever the change, it can create emotional stress for all family members. Moving to a new home is one example.

For children, a move may mean leaving known friends and loved relatives. They'll leave behind familiar sounds, scents, and sights of home. A move requires children to develop new relationships with peers and adults in a different child care program or school.

Even though a household move temporarily interrupts a child's predictable routines and comfort, a move in itself isn't necessarily bad. A move can help children learn to be adaptable, flexible, resilient, self-confident, brave, and capable of making new friends. Moves can broaden children's experiences and introduce them to greater diversity.

But of course, not all family moves are equal. Sometimes a move is required for a parent's job promotion or to be nearer extended family. Other times a move is required for a disappointing, more disruptive reason, such as job loss, parent divorce, or even natural disaster. And while most moves are planned, some children must adjust to emergency or very short-notice moves. Each situation offers unique challenges.

How children face and adjust to a move will vary according to age, inborn temperament, personality, experience, and family harmony. The first supportive step parents can take is to communicate honestly with children and then model and nurture positive coping skills.

The unknown can be more frightening to children than a move itself. So resist delaying news about the move; it will not reduce children's anxiety. While well-meaning, this may result in a child being overwhelmed by too swift a change. Children are likely to "eavesdrop" and learn of moving plans if you don't tell them first. Give preschoolers at least a month's notice so they can process information. Older children will appreciate even earlier notice.

Once you decide to move, be truthful and straightforward. Explain things in simple, matter-of-fact language. Discuss the move's pros and cons. Otherwise, you'll lose credibility and children's trust, something they desperately need to cling to during big life changes.

Leave pauses in conversations to give children a chance to ask questions. Make sure they know you're willing to listen to them and discuss their viewpoint. And if it is true, reassure them that the whole family is moving together; no one will be left behind.

As children react to news of the move, be empathetic and respect their feelings. Perhaps your child will express anger about moving. At first, you might be tempted to respond by saying, "You should be happy and grateful I'm trying to give you a nicer home." That comment merely serves to alienate a child and induce guilt.

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Most times children simply need parent assistance in sorting out and coping with feelings. A more supportive response helps children clarify their feelings, such as: “Moving is upsetting news to you. I wonder if you’re afraid you might not find new friends? Can you tell me about that?”

That response acknowledges the child’s feelings and gives the child the permission to elaborate. By exploring and expressing feelings, children learn to manage and reconcile them. They also get a clearer view of what they can and cannot control.

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Below are other suggestions for preparing children for a move and helping them adjust after a move:

- A move can drain children’s energy and interrupt concentration. When possible, avoid moving during stressful times — including near important family holidays.
- Read good children’s books about moving. This prepares children and invites communication. Two of my favorites are: *Alexander, Who’s Not (Do you bear me? I mean it?) Going to Move* by Judith Viorst (New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1995) and *A Tiger Called Thomas* by Diana Cain Bluthenthal (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2003).
- Rehearse upcoming events. Children can act out the move through pretend play with puppets, dolls, or stuffed animals. Old cardboard boxes can be “moving vans” and toy luggage storage for “treasures.”
- After announcing the move, encourage children to write, tell, or draw a story of what he/she thinks *might* happen. This gives insight into your child’s perceptions and feelings. After hearing the story, you can confirm information or clear up misconceptions. Use the same technique after the move to encourage your child to continue expressing thoughts and feeling.
- Help children gradually “warm up” to the move. Beforehand, tour the new neighborhood together. If you visit the new home or apartment, be sure to tell your child you’ll move your family’s belongings to the home so it will look more familiar. Visit several times so children can gradually get acquainted.
- Inform child care providers and teachers of the move so they know it may affect your child’s behavior. Ask them to contact you if they become concerned about your child’s adjustment.
- Having some sense of control over events reduces children’s anxious feelings. Include children in moving preparations so they feel like competent, contributing family members. Children can help pack toy boxes or plan ways to make the family pet’s move more comfortable, too. Children can also help pick out bedroom colors and help plan how to arrange bedroom furniture.

Moving to a new home and neighborhood will be one of your child’s first major life transitions. With your sensitive and responsive support, children will successfully meet the challenge. It’s a lesson that will serve them well for a lifetime.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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