



by Karen Stephens

Ways to Teach Children Positive Coping Skills During Life Changes

This column focuses on specific ways to help children acquire good coping skills. To begin the process, be sensitive to changes that affect your kids, such as home moves, job changes, having a new baby, or changing child care providers.

Secondly, when change is eminent, be truthful and straightforward. Give simple explanations so kids can understand why things are changing. Explaining change helps kids understand cause and effect which they often find perplexing. (Thus kids ask “Why?” a lot. As if you hadn’t already noticed!)

The unknown can be more frightening to children than change itself! Adults often delay informing children of change, believing this will reduce anxiety. While well meaning, this may result in a child being overwhelmed by too swift a change. Like adults, children need a little time to process information.

But remember, parenting is an art, not a science. It will take sensitivity to avoid telling a child too early or too late about change. Timing will depend upon the event. For instance, talking about a new baby doesn’t need to begin as soon as conception is confirmed. But it shouldn’t wait until the day before delivery, either! A good middle ground is when mom’s body begins to reveal the change on the horizon.

When telling kids about change, explain things in simple, matter-of-fact language. Leave pauses between statements, giving children a chance to ask questions. Make sure they know you’re willing to listen to their viewpoint and will discuss it.

Adjusting to change taxes children’s energy and concentration. When possible, limit the number of changes kids have to handle at any one time. For instance, avoid planning a vacation right after hosting a family reunion. This will reduce pressure and tension and allow familiar routines to be re-established. Daily, predictable routines convey comfort, stability, and dependability to children. They are a great antidote to change, which often makes children feel out of control and helpless.

As children react to information about changes, be empathetic and respect their feelings. Perhaps your child’s teacher is taking a maternity leave. It wouldn’t be unusual for a child to say she’s mad about her teacher’s absence. You might be tempted to say, “Oh, you shouldn’t feel that way. Her baby needs her at home. You wouldn’t want to keep a mother from her baby, would you?” But this would simply deny the child’s feeling and induce guilt, rather than compassion.

This child simply needs adult assistance in sorting out and coping with the feelings brought on by change. A supportive response could be, “Yes, you’re going to miss Carolyn while she is home taking care of her new baby. We’ll all be glad when she is back with us.” That response acknowledges the child’s feelings and gives the child the permission to say she’s not comfortable with the change. By exploring and expressing feelings, children learn to reconcile them. They get a clearer view on what changes they can and cannot control. Gradually they learn change is not something to be avoided, but a challenge to be responded to with thoughtfulness and understanding.

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There are other techniques to prepare children for changes and transitions in life. No one option works with all children, so consider an array of strategies.

- Read good children's books together that relate to an upcoming change. This will prepare children for events and open the door for communication. Your librarian can recommend a wide variety of books about going to the doctor, having a new baby in the house, moving to a new home, and so on.
- Role-play or rehearse upcoming events. Perhaps your child becomes particularly unruly at child care or school events you attend. A few days prior to your visit, take extra time with your child to act out what will be happening. This will give your child extra processing time to anticipate and ease into the change as well as the excitement your visit will create.
- Through puppet play, act out an upcoming change. Puppets provide a safety shield for children hesitant to express anxious feelings. Puppets often help children open up and reveal private concerns they would otherwise keep to themselves.
- When discussing change with children, discuss both the pros and cons. Some children tend to focus only on the negative and need a nudge from parents to help them redirect attention to the positive. On the other hand, some parents sugar-coat the effects of change in hopes of making their children cooperative and happy. Kids are smart. They can see through an act from a mile away. Certainly focus on the pros, but don't deny the cons. Otherwise you'll lose children's trust, something they desperately need to cling to during change.
- Help children gradually warm up to change. Before your child moves to a new classroom, arrange for her to visit the new teacher and children. Stay for a while so she can get acquainted in short intervals. Warm up visits allow children to gradually investigate and adjust to new surroundings and playmates. It's respectful and more manageable for kids than being thrown

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unexpectedly into a new situation and having to sink or swim.

- Prior to a change or stressful event, encourage your child to write, tell, or draw a story of what he thinks might happen. This will give you a view into your child's perceptions and feelings. After hearing your child's story, you can confirm information that's correct. But more importantly, you can clarify misconceptions that may cause your child unnecessary concern. For instance, a child facing hospitalization for corrective leg surgery may silently worry his leg will be cut off. If he is allowed to verbalize this, parents or a doctor can provide invaluable reassurance by explaining the actual surgical process in understandable terms.
- Keep child care providers and teachers informed of family changes that might affect child care or school behavior. When parents and teachers work together, children can usually cope with most daily stress.
- Change can make us all feel insecure and helpless. During change, let children make as many of their own decisions as possible. Autonomy offsets anxious feelings. It gives life balance and reminds kids they have control over some things in life, just not all things. (That's hard for parents to remember, too!)

And finally, when helping a child cope, don't hesitate to seek assistance from others. Prolonged periods of bumpy adjustments may require consultations among teachers, parents, extended family members, a social worker, or a psychologist.

In our *Parenting Exchange* column, "Adjustment: Life changes are 'teachable moments' for kids' coping skills," we talk about changes children face and how their emotions and behavior are affected by it.

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*.