

Stresses of Moving Can Be Minimized For Children

by Sylvia W. Lee

A company transfer, financial problems, a new job, or a divorce in the family—these are some of the reasons families change locations each year.

Unsettling as it is for adults, moving can be especially upsetting for children, whether they are toddlers or teenagers. Depending on their ages, children respond differently to change, but all children need information, reassurance, understanding, and support to cope with the disruption, confusion, and fear of the unknown caused by moving to a new home.

With proper preparation, moving can be a positive experience. A change in location doesn't have to affect a family negatively. It can bring families closer together. Children realize they can master a difficult situation, become more self-reliant, accept new environments, and make new friends while coping with the loss of old ones.

Infants are the easiest age group to move. As long as their schedules remain the same, they adapt quickly to the new situation. However, moving to a new environment can bring new sources of illnesses, and differences in time zones must be reckoned with.

Toddlers, on the other hand, are experiencing many internal changes that make it difficult for them to deal with changes in the external world. Even in a stable, familiar home environment, toddlers go through a stage when they are fearful of new people and places. Small changes in routines can make them tense and irritable.

Older children seem to have the most difficulty with a move and need to feel they have some control over what happens to them. Feelings of helplessness lead to resistance, quarreling, and disobedience of varying degrees.

To make moving less difficult and traumatic for children, here are some suggestions for parents:

- **Let toddlers know what to expect and don't plan surprises.** Keep routines as close as possible to what they were. Predictable routines give a sense of security. If you must use child care, get someone whom your toddler knows and likes. Expect signs of stress—whining, clinging, disruptive behavior—especially when you are at your busiest, and respond with reassurance. A hug will do more for his separation anxiety than reproach. Expect that some children may feel a temporary loss of security after a move. Extra attention, more elaborate bedtime routines, and/or sleeping with a nightlight on or with a favorite toy may help.
- **Tell children about the move as soon as possible.** This will give them time to adjust to the idea. The reasons for moving also need to be shared honestly. If a promotion or a new job prompts the move, discuss it with them and elicit their feelings about it. After all, their lives are going to be affected, too.
- **Help children learn about their new home.** Involve them in the pre-move or house-hunting trip. Discuss options for schools, friends, and housing. Let each child voice preferences, writing them all down in a notebook. Maps and other information can be obtained from the

Chamber of Commerce in the new hometown. Perhaps a pre-move visit to the community can be planned. If so, photograph the new house, the school, and other attractions and let your children begin a scrapbook with pictures and information.

- **Ease children's fears about leaving friends.** Provide an address book with addresses and pictures, if possible, of friends. Plan a going-away party and set aside a day to say goodbye to special friends, both children and adults. To help with the transition from old friends to new, one family put an ad in the personal section of their new local paper that read, "Family with boy, 8, and girl, 11, moving to (place) on (date). New life guides needed. Write Box...."
- **Involve children in cleaning up the old home and packing.** Depending on the children's ages and abilities, encourage them to pack their belongings and label the cartons so they can be found easily upon arrival. Each child can be given a special box for personal treasures to be moved in the car, rather than the van, so he or she will have these special possessions as soon as he or she arrives at the new home. Two rules of great importance: Don't throw away children's possessions without first consulting them and don't leave anything behind without first discussing it with your child.
- **Explain to children whether pets can make the move with the family.** If pets aren't allowed in the new location or can't come for some reason, work out a solution together. If the pet is making the move, decide with your children how it will be cared for during the move.
- **Consider children's interests on moving day;** for example, do they want to be around or would they rather spend the day with a friend or relative? If they choose to stay, sit down with them the day before the van arrives and compile a list of things for them to do so they'll feel needed instead of in the way.
- **Prepare children for the first day of school in the new location.** Try to discover the similarities or differences between the old and new school and let them know what to expect.
- **Let children know it is normal to feel sad, angry, and lonely,** and accept their feelings without judgment or censure. Saying, "Everything will be OK," is not as helpful as, "I understand your concerns; let's think of ways we can make things easier."
- **Read books about moving** so children can learn that it is all right to admit to fears or problems. They can also discover how others coped and solved problems related to moving.
- **Celebrate once you are in the new home.** Before the move, sit down as a family and plan a special ceremony to be conducted once you have arrived.

Moving to a new home will always be a stressful event for children and their parents, but by approaching it positively, parents can help their children develop skills that will be useful throughout their lives.

Sylvia W. Lee is the editor of the *Birth To Three Parenting Newsletter* and a staff member of the *Birth To Three Warmline*.

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