

Helping your child when they are changing schools



All kids face challenging times at some stage during their life and most children will need to change school at some time. The transition may be planned and part of the normal transitions children make, from moving to primary school and moving from primary school on to high school. The transition may also be brought about by changes in life circumstances that are unrelated to the normal transitions of a child's life. Unplanned change is usually more stressful than planned change.

Transitions are changes from one place to another. These changes may be gradual or sudden, expected or unexpected. Our capacity to cope with change is one component of mental health. For children who have been affected by a loss, disaster or traumatic event, coping with additional change can be challenging.

Regardless of the reason for your child changing schools, almost all children take some time to adjust to the change. School transitions can bring about negative changes that include increased distress, low self-esteem, worries, decrease in academic performance and social difficulties.

Successful transition involves making adjustments for the child and also for the parents. Each school community will be different, with its own culture to be understood and worked with. Developing relationships with a school and understanding the system and its expectations helps both children and adults to become part of that system.

Some of the ways children may feel about changing schools

Changing schools can bring with it feelings of excitement, anticipation, worry, anxiety, curiosity and for some, resentment. Starting at a new school inevitably includes leaving behind the old, with its friendships, known patterns of community life and familiar teachers.

As a parent you can help your child to make the change successfully and as happy as possible by:

- Involving your child, as much as possible, in the decision to change school and in the choice of new school.
- Meet the new teachers and speak with your child about the positives of the school and speak with them about the differences.
- Prepare them for their first day, take time to find out how the school operates and what expectations there are for the student.
- Keep in contact with important friends from the old school, help your child stay in touch with them for as long as they want.
- Provide security, safety and a friendly ear for your child to talk about the new school experience.

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When your child has experienced a traumatic event and must change school

Increased communication between home and school is particularly important after a traumatic event. Teachers need to know what has happened in your child's life and as much as possible, your child needs to be part of the decision making about changing school and choosing which school they will go to.

Events such as disasters can mean that a new school must be found quickly and without choice. It is helpful to involve your child in decisions where you can. Disasters and other traumatic events frequently take choice away and are overwhelming and seen as being out of one's control. Helping your child to be part of planning, providing routine and preparing for differences in the schools before hand are strategies that will help your child regain their sense of trust in the world and in you.

Children who experience trauma and disaster lose a lot of things. Changing school is seen as another thing lost and to have to manage. It may involve the loss of their previous support network, friendships and comfort with routine at their old school, memories and sense of safety.

What you can do

- Provide information to the school about your child's experiences, strengths, fears and challenges.
- Ask the school to develop a 'safe place' and 'support system' to help your child to settle in to the new school and manage their responses to the traumatic event.
- Remind your child of strategies they can use to feel calm, safe and in control.
- Visit the school with your child before they begin, see if you can arrange a transition visit for practice. Make this a short visit.
- For young children, it is helpful to play in the grounds of their new school on the weekend. This gives them a

sense of familiarity.

- Arrange play dates with new friends.
- Maintain routine and predictability. Demonstrate the belief that change can be managed.

Reducing difficulties during change by even a small amount can make a big difference

Work towards forming a trusting partnership with your child's school and find a staff member that you can speak confidently with about your child and their needs. You can also remind your child that big things like getting used to a new situation take time. Remember to make sure you celebrate your child's successes and be confident with your child, while quietly listening for concerns.

Over time, your child will most likely settle in to their new school. This may take days, weeks or months. If you are concerned with how your child is settling in, it is important that you talk to your child's teacher, a school counsellor or another school professional. They may be able to help you by providing your child with some extra support and some alternate strategies to assist them. If you have any ongoing concerns about your child's level of distress, or their mental health, you can talk to your GP, school counsellor or another mental health or child professional.

Trauma & Grief Network www.tgn.anu.edu.au

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