



Helping Children Cope: Children and Moving

Family and Consumer Sciences

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One in five American families move annually. It is estimated that this involves over one million children (15 percent of the population) between the ages of birth and 18. Whatever the reasons for moving, relocating can be stressful for people at any age but may be especially difficult for children.

How Moving Affects Children

Moving has been regarded by many child development experts as being one of the most disruptive events in a child's life. Although children tend to be resilient and can learn to cope well, no move is problem free. Children can experience the fear of rejection, pain of separation, and other anxieties just like adults. The way a child reacts to a move depends on several factors including individual personality, the availability of playmates, and circumstances surrounding the move. Other factors may also impact how moving can affect children.

Parents. A parent's attitude toward a move can greatly influence a child's reaction to the idea. For example, children whose parents dread the move will also react negatively to relocation. On the other hand, if the parents see the move as a great opportunity, the children will respond more positively. Parents need to talk with their children about the changes that will be occurring. Likewise, children should be encouraged to help pack favorite toys, books, or pet supplies. It has been recommended that a young child's bed be the last thing packed, and the first thing unpacked in a new home. During the weeks before and after a move, parents should plan to spend extra time talking with children about their new surroundings, as well as ways to keep in touch with old friends. A recent study suggests that when a child's world is disrupted by a move, parents are in the greatest position to provide the extra emotional support needed during the transition.



Age. A child's age is another important factor that can affect how children react to moving. Infants and toddlers find security in the presence of their parents, in a few favorite possessions, and in the maintaining of a nearly normal routine. If these actions are taken, children this age will not likely suffer from the move.

Pre-kindergarten children gain security from their family, too. However, with the increase of preschool and day-care arrangements, children in this age group are more vulnerable to relocation as a result of their increased social ties outside the family.

At five and six years of age, children are developing greater social routines at school and with friends. Moving can cause them to worry about both a new school and new friends. However, moving can also have benefits for children. It extends their horizons by giving them more school opportunities, extra-curricular activities, and special classes. Including a child this age on the trip to select your new house or apartment will help to ease fears. Another way to ease your child's fears is to take pictures of a park, nursery school, and kids from the new area you are moving to. This will help your child look forward to moving, while realizing that life will continue much like it was before.

Children tend to be adaptable to change, more so than adults. The younger the child, the easier it can be

for him or her to adapt. One study found that children in junior high experience the most trauma when responding to a move. Another study found that teenagers were especially vulnerable to being uprooted, feeling a loss of identity when leaving their peers. Parents may need to give more time to adolescents and preadolescents who may be less receptive to the idea of moving and who may need added support in feeling they can find a place in their new surroundings.

Prior moves. Practice can be an asset in moving. It appears that children who have moved before handle a move better than those who are moving for the first time. Children who move more than once can learn to adapt more quickly to a change in surroundings and school, and their overall education can benefit as a result of traveling from one place to another.

Strategies to Smooth Transactions

At first, children can feel overwhelmed and intimidated by new people and surroundings. In response, they may withdraw, react negatively, avoid new situations, or backslide developmentally. Fortunately, there are strategies that adults can use to make moving less traumatic.

Talk with children about the move. The first step in helping children deal with relocating is to understand that children can worry about the changes that will take place. Talk with children about what to expect during the move, and talk about specifics like the new neighborhood, rooms in the new home, or ways you can work together to meet new friends.

Involving children in the move. Parents can involve children in the move as much as possible. Children enjoy packing and labeling boxes. By helping with this process, they can gain a sense of control over the situation. Packing together also provides excellent opportunities to talk about the move.

Observe children's needs. Not all children will discuss their worries easily. A parent may need to become especially observant of how children are feeling by watching them in their play or with other children. Children may talk with a friend or a pet about their fears when they might be unable to do so at dinnertime. Offer dolls and puppets to act out a story about a family who is moving. Provide crayons and paper to allow children to express their feelings through art. Watching for clues to how a child is feeling is especially important during a time of change.

Provide continuity. Activities children know and enjoy should be continued. A special song, a favorite book, or a preferred snack can be used to ease the transition. It is also important to emphasize the similarities between the old and new surroundings because children will quickly note the differences.

Say goodbye to people and places. Every transition involves losses and gains. When we experience loss, it is healthy to feel sad or to grieve. A few months before the move, you and your children should list all of the people you want to say goodbye to. Decide if your good-byes will be through a note, sharing a meal, or a picnic. Maybe have a going away party before you leave. Visit favorite places that will be missed. On the day of the move, go with your child to each room in your house and say goodbye. By encouraging healthy "good-byes," we sow the seeds for healthy "hellos."

Take your child to the community where you will be moving. Your child will probably discover that the new community is really not that different from the one they are leaving. Drive by the new school, and even visit it for a few minutes. Look for new things your child might enjoy like a park, zoo, or museum. Much of the fear of moving is the fear of the unknown, and by seeing the new community your child will begin to understand the move better.

Promote and establish friendships. Children may feel more comfortable communicating with others their own age. In the new neighborhood and new school, a prearranged "buddy" can assist a newcomer with peer interactions, playground rules, lunchtime routines, and teacher expectations.

Using books to help adjust to changes. Books are wonderful vehicles to help children deal with difficult situations. Story characters who demonstrate similar relocations and successful coping strategies are excellent resources for children. The concerns of characters within a story can serve as a wonderful way to begin talking about personal worries a child may be having.

Moving to a new location brings about many changes in the lives of children. New environments, friends, schools, and routines require adjustment by the entire family. When parents think about moving as a positive experience and keep in mind the special needs of children, the transition can go more smoothly. Children and adults need to learn to adapt in times of rapid change. Becoming flexible is a result of experiencing change.

ARE YOU READY TO GO?

Answer “yes” or “no” to each of the following questions:

- _____ Have you discussed the move with your children?
- _____ Are your children comfortable with the idea of moving?
- _____ Have you talked about ways everyone can help in the moving arrangements?
- _____ Have you visited your child’s school and asked for a copy of all records to take to the new school?
- _____ Have you contacted all clubs/groups your child takes part in and requested transfer information for your new community?
- _____ Have you requested copies of all dental and medical records to carry with you?
- _____ Have you visited the new school and checked on transportation and/or child care?
- _____ Have you arranged with the school counselor for a new “buddy” for your child?
- _____ Did your children have a chance to visit the new home, or see pictures?
- _____ Have you made plans for your children to say goodbye to friends, relatives, playgrounds, and their bedrooms?
- _____ Have you talked about ways to stay in contact with old friends?

If you answered “yes” to all or most of these questions, you shouldn’t have many problems getting your children settled into your new home. If you answered “no” to most of these questions, it would be helpful to take more time to prepare your children for the move.

CHILDREN’S BOOKS ABOUT MOVING*

Under 5

Franklin’s Bad Day—Paulette Bourgeois, Scholastic, Inc.
The Leaving Morning—Angela Johnson, Orchard Books
Melanie Mouse’s Moving Day—Cyndy Szekeres, Western Publishing Company
We are Moving—Rachel Biale, Tricycle P.
Best Friends Together Again—Aliko, Greenwillow Books

Over 5

Alexander, Who’s Not (Do you hear me? I mean it!) Going to Move—Judith Viorst, Simon & Schuster Children’s
It’s Starting to Feel like Home—Stephen Krensky, Scholastic, Inc.
Goodbye, House: A Kids’ Guide to Moving—Ann Banks, Crown Publishing Group

The Lost and Found House—Michael Cadnum, Viking Penguin
Pinky and Rex and the New Neighbors—James Howe, Simon & Schuster
Time to Go—Beverly Fiday, Harcourt Brace & Company
What You Know First—Patricia MacLachlan, HarperCollins
Children’s books

Older Children

Moving Gives Me a Stomach Ache—Heather McKend, Firefly Books

**Books recommended for children of one age can be enjoyed by children of other ages, too.*

After the Move. Changing schools can be a traumatic event for a school-aged child. Your child may need some extra support. Here are some suggestions to make the transition easier:

- Talk with your child about their feelings, both the excitement and concerns of changing schools.
- Visit the school with your child before the first day. Peek into the classroom, and if possible meet the teacher. You might be able to address some of your child's concerns that day, instead of the first day of school. Visiting the school may answer some of his/her questions too.
- Try to have your child meet and play with a classmate before school starts so that they see a familiar face on the first day, and maybe even be excited to see their "new friend".
- Don't build up unrealistic expectations about how wonderful the new school will be, but do be optimistic about how things will go for your child at the new school.
- Try to get your child involved in some activities before school starts so that he or she can make new friends.

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