

Making the Move Easy On the Kids

Most often, a move represents an important step forward for the adults in the family because of a new job, promotion, transfer to a different office, or financial success has allowed them to buy a more comfortable house in a different neighborhood.

Moving from one house to another is seldom easy and enjoyable for adults (who chose to move), and can be especially troubling for children (who prefer to stay where they are). But if parents are mindful of their children's concerns and needs, they can minimize distress and discomfort.

A Move Affects Children and Adults Differently

People typically live in a house for about five years and then move on as their jobs and incomes allow. Five years is a small percentage of an adult's life, but it's half the lifetime of a 10-year old: It includes almost all the years he or she can remember. It may be the only home the child's ever known, and the place s/he feels most safe and comfortable.

A house is much more than a place to live to children. It's the center of their world, associated with familiar activities, sights, and sounds. A move threatens a child's security and leaves something unknown in its place. Their friends, and the familiar streets, schools, shops, trees and parks are gone. The new neighborhood is someone else's world.

The impact of a move on a child starts about the time he or she first hears about it, and often continues until the new house becomes home. It's not necessary to tell young children about this big change immediately, although they must hear about it from their parents before someone else tells them.

Expect that your children may be even more distressed after the move. The new house will not be comfortable or beautiful the night the moving van leaves, or for months after. The furniture won't fit the rooms, and the floor will be covered with half-unpacked boxes. The children won't know anyone at school and, if you move during the summer, they may have little opportunity to meet others their age. They'll need your help: Plan ahead to support and comfort them and ease the stress of the move.

Easing the Stress of the Move

Young Children Have Special Needs

Describe the move in a truthful, positive way. Tell upbeat stories about the benefits of the new house and location. Plan together to make the new setting feel like home:

- Ask about their favorite activities (e.g., soccer), and plan to investigate youth programs in the new community.
- Ask what they like best about the present house (e.g., the swimming pool) and assure them that you'll find a place for them to swim in the new town.
- Ask what they like best about the neighborhood (e.g., their friends), and make plans to invite the children on the block to a *Welcome to the Neighborhood Party* once you've settled in.
- Ask what they like the most about their school (e.g., their teacher), and let them know that you'll request a tour of their new school and a chance to meet their teacher beforehand.
- Ask what they like most about their community (e.g., the video game parlor), and assure them that those activities will be available in the new location.
- Use children's literature. Books can help children prepare for and understand difficult situations. Story characters who model successful coping strategies are an excellent resource for children.
- If the new home is too far away for the entire family to visit, show the children pictures of the house, yard, and neighborhood. Videotape it if you can. Include pictures of each child's new room.
- Ask the children to name the house with an inviting description, like "Oak Hill," for the big trees and sloping lawn.

Young children need protection from fear of the unknown. Listen carefully to their concerns and respond quickly to relieve their apprehensions. It's normal, for instance, for a young child to worry that his or her toy box and shelf of stuffed animals might be left behind.

Uncover those anxieties by actively involving your children in the process.

- Don't just promise to let them decorate their own rooms – take them to the paint store and let them bring home color swatches. Shop together for bedspreads and towels and carpets.
- They must leave old friends behind. Plan a going-away party and let them invite their own guests to bring closure to that parting.
- Take pictures of everyone and make a photo album. If a child is old enough, send him or her out with a camera and the assignment to photograph the scenes he'll want to remember.
- Suggest that they can keep in touch with people who are important to them by phone, texting or e-mail.
- Buy a stack of picture postcards that show positive views of your new community and encourage them to write messages to the friends and relatives they left behind.
- Try to pack children's things last and include them in the packing process.
- Keep security objects such as a favorite teddy bear or blanket close by. Keep your routine as normal as possible. Regular eating and nap times are important.

Encourage children to get outside and get to know the people and the neighborhood.

Encourage older children to distribute fliers for babysitting, lawn care, or car washing.

Encourage them to participate in school activities that appeal to them. Get them on sports teams and into clubs. Throw a housewarming party for yourselves and invite all the adults and children on the block.

Teenagers

Most teenagers see themselves as adult members of the family, and may feel disrespected if they don't hear about the move early in the process. Also, they'll need time to work through the ordeal of leaving their friends. Ending relationships and saying goodbyes takes time, and is best done before the move. Some relationships will be extremely difficult to bring to an end, and these will require thoughtful, personalized planning. How, for instance, do you move a 17-year-old a thousand miles from her steady boyfriend?

Even though teens seem more advanced in their social skills, they may worry a lot about making friends and fitting in. Visit their new school and check out local activities and employment opportunities for young people.

Communities have their own culture and way of doing things, and this is often reflected in the way teens dress. How they look is really important to teens. Before spending money on a new school wardrobe, your teen may want to observe what's "in." Purchasing a few new outfits can often help a teen feel more comfortable.

It's particularly important to let teens know that you want to hear about, and respect, their concerns. Blanket assurances may seem to your teen like you're dismissing his or her feelings. It may help to explain that the move is a type of rehearsal for future changes, like college or a new job.

At any age, get help if emotional problems arise. Ask a teacher for assistance. Consider professional counseling. Don't let a serious problem slide.

Eventually, the strangeness and temporary discomforts should diminish. New friends will become good friends. The new house may become the family gathering place that your grandchildren will visit on holidays. In the long run, everything will work out fine.

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