



Information

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Moving home....

Why is moving house stressful for a child?

Deciding to move house is a big upheaval for the entire family. But while adults tend to focus on the practical problems, a child will focus on all the losses that the move causes. This can be the loss of their friends or of a safe and familiar environment.

The decision to move is, after all, taken by the adults and the child feels powerless because it cannot, and should not, influence that decision. The degree of stress in moving is often underestimated by all concerned. Research shows that moving house is one of the greatest stresses we face in our lives. In its capacity to cause psychological distress it comes only after losing a close relative in terms of severity, and ahead of illness, loss of employment and divorce.



Of course planned and managed well, distress is not necessarily the outcome.

How can the move be made less stressful?

Talk to children about the move and do it early to give them as much time as possible to get used to the idea. Tell the children all about their new home and give them lots of facts and information appropriate for their age group and level of understanding.

Young children have short attention spans, so be prepared for them to talk about the move only for a short while before moving on to something completely different. Do not expect a young child to spend the entire evening discussing the move and its consequences. If a child is ready to talk or has a particular question, make the most of it and be ready with answers.

Even though a child can't decide which house to buy or which town to move to, they can get involved in other ways like choosing colours to decorate rooms. That way they will feel part of the process.

If possible, take the child to visit the new place a couple of times before moving in. This will often help make the whole thing more real and familiar.

How will a child react?

Some children may not be bothered by the move at all and may be very excited by it. Other children may have a range of reactions depending largely on their age. Young children may:

- start sucking their thumb
- wet the bed
- talk baby talk
- cling to you constantly.

Older children may:

- refuse to eat
- suffer insomnia
- twirl their hair endlessly
- become shy
- become aggressive.

School age children may:

- change their sleeping patterns
- have trouble concentrating
- have stomach aches or headaches.



Some children seem to change their personality and may suddenly start lying or stealing. These reactions are stress reactions. Since a child cannot always understand what is going on or express their own complicated feelings, they show these signs of stress.

All children need good, nourishing food and enough rest and sleep. It is essential that the child has at least one adult who can spend time with them and give them the opportunity to talk. During this difficult period of transition, quality time with their parents is very important for a child.

What is the move like for children under five?

Small children under five are the easiest to move. Their sense of security depends entirely on their parents and they usually feel safe provided their parents are around. Prepare young children for the move with simple explanations, that you can repeat often. At this age, a child will benefit from being told stories about other children their age who are moving.

When it's time to start packing, explain to the child that their toys are just being put in boxes so they can be taken to their new home. Otherwise, the child may worry that all their toys are about to disappear or be taken away from them.

Do not make any promises that you cannot keep. For example, don't promise that when you move the child can have a pet if that's not going to happen. If a parent breaks a promise, the child will find it harder to trust them.

Try not to buy a new bed or other furniture during this period. New things create a feeling of insecurity. Old things are familiar and create a feeling of security.

If possible, it can be a good idea for the child to spend moving day with friends or relatives. Otherwise, they may feel left out or in the way because Mum and Dad are so busy.

What is the move like for a school-age child?

The big question when you have a school-age child is whether they will like their new school and make new friends. Children spend a lot of time in school so it is important that they like it.

It is debatable whether it is better to move during the school year or the summer holidays. If the change of school takes place over the summer, the child has more time to get used to the idea and has a fresh start with the rest of the children. The drawback is that the child will then spend the summer without their old friends and without much opportunity to make new ones. If this is the case try and organise things so that the child is not bored or lonely.

What is the move like for a teenager?

A teenager will usually understand why the family has to move and what the consequences are. But a move may upset a teenager's life very much. They will often lose their group of friends which is the most important thing in their life. They may be separated from a boyfriend or girlfriend. It can be hard to start a new school at this age, when being accepted by people of your own age group is so important.

Avoid fobbing them off with clichés like 'everything will be fine' or 'time is a great healer', or they are likely to rebel. The best way to help a teenager is to listen to them and treat their concerns with respect. Let them know you understand that the situation is difficult and that you must find the best solution together - if there is a solution. It is important to listen, understand and above all, respect the teenager's feelings and wishes.

What do I do on the actual day?

The day of the move is a day of change and the decision is now irrevocable. Take care of your child's new room first. Having a base will make the child feel more secure. Stick to normal mealtimes and bedtimes. If you do not have time, ask someone - a friend, a sister or brother or your child's grandparents - for help.

How long will it take for a child to get used to a new home?

Do not expect a child to be ready to go to school straightaway. They need a little time to get used to their new surroundings.

Once in school, a six-week period for a child to get used to their new surroundings is normal.

Getting to know the child's new teachers and making them aware of the situation is important, especially for younger children. You can help the staff 'get up to speed' in their understanding of a child by giving them some background information about your child's school career so far.

If a child has trouble adjusting to new surroundings they may show one or more of the following symptoms:

- headache or stomachache
- depression
- solitude
- lower marks at school
- anti-social behaviour such as lying or stealing.

If, after a month or two, the child has not adapted to their new school and new home, the parents may consider getting professional help.

Can moving house be positive?

A move may turn out to be a positive experience for the whole family, provided they go about it in the right way. The reason behind the move may be something good, but any kind of change creates the need for a lot of communication and planning and this may create closer relations in the family. Suddenly it's more natural to talk about feelings and expectations.

During a move, parents get the opportunity to learn more about their children, their reactions and feelings. After a successful house move, they may find that their child has become more independent.

This newsletter has been issued by:

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Play Therapy * Counselling * Trauma Counselling

Please note that this information must not be used for diagnostic purposes. Please visit a medical professional for a correct diagnosis.