

Helping Your Child Adjust to a New Home and School

Overview

Tips for helping you smooth your child's entry into a new school when you move.

- New town, new school
- Being new in kindergarten or elementary school
- New teenager in town: middle school, junior high, or high school

Transitions are difficult. Most children are at least a little apprehensive when they start school. But if they are new in town, their struggles to adjust and be accepted by their peers can be even more challenging. Millions of children relocate in the U.S. every year, but that doesn't make it any easier.

As a parent, you can be an important source of love and support during this time of transition. It's important to remember that the changes your child is facing can be of monumental importance to him or her and should not be minimized. Ask questions, become informed about your child's school and social life, and train yourself to listen often and well.

New town, new school

Saying goodbye to friends and teachers is just the beginning. Children worry about whether they will be behind and have trouble keeping up with their new class. Will they make friends or sit alone at lunch? Will there be a spot for them in the new school's orchestra or on the soccer team? Will this school offer the courses they need to get into college? You can't predict your child's future, but here are some steps you can take to increase the chances of a successful transition:

Before the move

- *Visit the new school.* A pre-move visit can give your child an important opportunity to meet her future teachers and check out the physical environment. It can also give her an idea of who her new classmates will be.
- *Make sure your child gets placed at the right learning level.* Arrange to have his school records sent well in advance of your move. If that's not possible, hand deliver these documents as soon as you arrive in the new town. It's also a good idea to put together a file that contains copies of your child's most recent report cards and test scores, immunization information, special education records if applicable, a portfolio of his work, and any other information you feel may help his teachers become aware of who he is and what his strengths and needs are.
- *Find out about screening and placement tests.* Some schools require screening tests for placement purposes and have course prerequisites in order to place transfer students at the appropriate academic level for their skills. This is especially true if the move takes place midyear. Find out in advance if this is the case at your

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child's new school and schedule any tests as soon as possible -- perhaps even before you relocate.

- *Look for good books or Web sites for children or teenagers that deal with moving.* Many picture and chapter books deal in a sympathetic way with the concerns children have about moving. Ask a librarian to help you find them. You might start your search for Web sites with the award-winning KidsHealth.org. Elementary- and middle-school children will find advice about moving, written for their age group, at http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/home_family/moving.html. High school students can find tips at http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/moving.html.

After the move

Your relationship with your child may be the most consistent thing in her life during this time of great change. She may not say so, but your presence and the stability you create at home are very important to her sense of well-being. Be sure to talk with your child every day about her new school. Ask her how she feels, who she's getting to know, and what new things she's learned.

- *Be part of the teaching and learning team.* Your child's academic adjustment is just as important as his fitting in socially. You can help by asking to review your child's file with a school counselor or teacher at the new school. You'll also want to establish a good working relationship with your child's teachers and make them aware of his academic history, including any particular interventions or accommodations your child previously received.
- *Give the process time.* It usually takes weeks or months for a child's academic performance to level out after a move. After a month or two, you can begin to compare the quality of pre- and post-move schoolwork and set up an appointment to talk with a teacher if you have questions or there seems to be a problem.

Being new in kindergarten or elementary school

Even children with a couple of school years under their belts can grow anxious when school starts. So the child who is going to a new school for the first time can be expected to feel apprehensive. Here are some things you can do to take the edge off your child's anxiety and even get her excited about the big day:

At school

- *Try the buddy system.* If your child is young and would be comfortable with such a request, ask the classroom teacher to assign him a "buddy" for his first days at the new school.
- *Talk with your child.* The best way to find out what scares a child is to ask her. Some fears may be easy to defuse. A map of the school, for example, can relieve a child's panic over getting lost in an unfamiliar building.

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- *Hold a dry run.* Your child will feel more confident about going to school if he knows the way there and back. Visit the bus stop or walk the route together before the school year starts. Walk with your child for the first days or weeks of the year, or until your child feels secure and confident on his own.
- *Get to know a classmate.* Meeting someone from her class before the first day of school means that your child will see a familiar face when she walks into her new classroom. Ask around among your neighbors if you don't immediately spot someone your child's age.
- *Learn the classroom customs.* Find out ahead of time what the class does about snack time and lunch so that your child will be prepared and won't feel left out or awkward.
- *Be ready to disappear.* On the first day of school, take your cue from your child when it comes to lingering for the official tour and introductions. Even a 6-year-old may want to go it alone. Respect his wishes.

At home

- *Keep talk positive.* Young children often worry about the unknown. Avoid frightening her with talk of excessive homework or tough teachers. Older siblings are notorious for this and should be headed off at the pass.
- *Establish consistent daily routines.* They can cut down on a young child's anxiety, especially when things around him are changing. A regular bedtime, for example, can help him overcome insomnia.
- *Be lavish with your praise.* Let your child know the family is proud of her by pointing out specific behaviors or past accomplishments of which the family is especially proud. Acknowledge that starting a new school is a grownup step and encourage your child to be proud of herself by saying something about a special ability or trait that your child has. For example, if your child is good at drawing, you could say, "I hope that you feel proud of your art, because you can draw so well. When you make new pictures at your school, they will look good up on the walls." Or if your child is very helpful to others, you might say, "I hope you feel very proud about how you have helped others in your old school. The teachers and classmates in your new school don't know it yet, but they are getting someone who is very caring and helpful."

New teenager in town: middle school, junior high, or high school

Your teenager may take relocating especially hard. He may feel he's leaving behind an entire life and personal identity. For some teenagers, the transition to a new town and school can trigger plummeting self-esteem and a waning interest in academics. Though they share many of the same anxieties as younger children, teenagers are less likely to turn to their parents for help. This doesn't mean they don't need it.

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Acknowledge that what he's going through isn't easy and keep the lines of communication open. Here are some concrete ways you can help a teenager ease into life in a new community:

At school

- *Find out about orientation.* If the new school offers an orientation for new students, have your teenager attend.
- *Touch base with your teenager's adviser or school counselor early on.* Your teenager will need to make important decisions about her academic career, such as what courses to take and which level of courses to pursue, including advanced placement or honors classes. A school counselor can explain the different choices and requirements and help you determine if your teenager is taking the right classes.
- *Find ways to stay involved in your teenager's school life.* Go to the meetings and topical lectures offered by the parent-teacher organization and schedule occasional conferences with your teenager's teachers or advisers. Attend school-related functions such as sports events, plays, or concerts, or even chaperone a field trip or dance. These are all ways to keep a gentle eye on what the school is like and how your teenager is fitting in.
- *Sign up for regular school communications.* Check to see if your child's new school has a parent e-newsletter or listserv to help you keep abreast of important dates and current issues.
- *Help him present himself.* Have your teenager gather letters of reference from his teachers, employers, and the leaders of his extracurricular activities in your old town. Presenting these to his new coach, teacher, or boss can help him offset the loss of recognition that comes with relocating.

At home

- *Introduce her to a schoolmate.* Try to arrange for your teenager to meet a neighbor who goes to the school she'll be entering and who can be a source of inside information on the way things work.
- *Encourage him to get involved in extracurricular activities after school.* Classrooms don't always lend themselves to forging new friendships. Sports and activities offered through school and community organizations bring more people into a teenager's life.
- *Keep old friendships warm.* Staying in touch with old friends may not be as good as living next door, but utilizing social networks like Facebook, and texting or phoning old friends will raise your teenager's morale while he's in the process of forming new friendships.

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- *Give it time.* Keep in mind that it could take as long as a year for your teenager to feel comfortably settled in her new school. She may go through different friends and different phases. During this adjustment period, it can be helpful to remember how she handled transitions in the past. Were they hard for her? Easy? Often this is a good predictor of what to expect in the present situation.
- *Realize that you're all going through a big change.* When a family relocates, everyone goes through a time of transition -- so unpack your patience and sense of humor as you arrive in your new town and begin your adjustment. Try to maintain a positive attitude, listen well, show respect, give encouragement, and pay attention to your child's school life and social life. As a parent, you are in a position to offer the important elements of loving support and consistency amid the many exciting -- and sometimes stressful -- changes your child is facing.

For more information and resources on making the adjustment to a new school, visit the Web site of the National Association of School Psychologists at www.nasponline.org/families/index.aspx. The program that provided this publication has other resources on all aspects of parenting.

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