

A D J U S T I N G T O B I G C H A N G E S

Adjusting to changes is hard, especially for little ones. Preschoolers are learning to understand the world around them, which can be hard to do when things change. Communication and openness are the best tools to help a child adjust. This guide includes our advice for navigating common changes your child might be experiencing. If your family or your child is going through a hard time, please let us know!

A New Baby Joining the Family

New babies can create significant changes for a preschooler who is used to things being a certain way at home. Babies have a lot of needs, and as a result, our daily patterns change to meet those needs. A change in routine can be a hard adjustment for a small child. An excellent way to help a little one adjust is to practice small changes before the baby arrives. If, for instance, sleeping arrangements will be changing when the baby arrives, practice those new sleeping arrangements before the baby comes. Practicing will make the change less sudden and the transition more manageable when the time comes.

An excellent way to prepare your little one for how much extra time a new baby requires could be to learn through play. Regularly caring for a baby doll together can help your preschooler see how much time it takes to care for a new baby. This kind of play can also help your child become interested in helping to care for their new sibling.

New babies require attention, and small children can sometimes feel left out. It can be helpful to involve your child when caring for the baby. Many little kids love caring for babies, which can reduce feeling left out. Practicing with a baby doll can be a good tool here, too, to help your kiddo learn how to help with the baby.

Communication is essential in helping a child adjust to a new baby. Talking about the baby, what the baby will need, what may or may not change, etc., will help prepare your little one for the changes ahead.

Death in the Family

Adjusting to a death in the family is difficult for most people. Many families may find themselves in a position where they must help their little one adjust to a loss. Death is another place where communication is vital. Learning about life cycles may help them understand what happened.

Avoid using sugar-coated and fantastical explanations of what happened, like “going over the rainbow bridge” or telling them that the loved one has “gone away for a while.” These ideas can make death seem temporary and make it harder for them to understand the event. Clear, honest, but age-appropriate and gentle communication is your best bet. Additionally, ensure you provide space for your child to share their feelings with you and just be with them while they grieve.

Moving

Moving can be a significant change requiring a lot of adjustment. If possible, visit the new neighborhood often. Find things you can plan to do or explore after moving to help your little one get excited about the move. If you’re moving into a home you have access to, with a family member, for example, try to visit and sleep where your little one will regularly sleep after the move. Take the time to look up different things in the area if you can’t visit. Doing whatever you can to help familiarize them with their new home and new neighborhood will make a move less shocking.

Gather contact information for any friends and plan to make play dates if you’re not moving too far away. If you are moving far away, try to arrange online play dates to keep them in touch with their friends. Losing friends and adjusting to a new place all at the same time can be overwhelming and make adjusting more difficult.

Adjusting to Other Big Changes

Age-appropriate communication, honesty, and responding to your child with patience and empathy will go a long way in supporting them. Role-playing, when appropriate, can help provide the context in some big situations. Like adjusting to a new baby, you can use pretend play to help prepare your child for meeting a new doctor, going to a new school, moving, getting a new pet, etc. Encourage your child to share their feelings and ask questions. Regard those feelings and questions with the same importance your child expresses.

Be an open ear for them while they transition to the new situation. Your child may have a lot of feelings, and they may want to talk about them. Provide a safe space and meet your little one with patience and empathy for those feelings and any feelings they cannot communicate. Meet meltdowns with understanding and compassion, and do not try to stop the meltdown. Children aren't capable of rationalizing during a moment of crisis. The best thing you can do is ensure they're in a safe space and be there for them. When they calm down, you can talk about what led to their big feelings.