



## Helping Your Child Cope with Change

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As we shift into another season, families are once again facing change. The weather is changing, routines are changing, and children are changing grades and friends. Changes can be exciting but can also present challenges, especially for children. Transitions can happen any time of year, but the start of a new school year brings a number of shifts all at once for many families. Whether expected or unexpected, changes can stir up various feelings.

There are a number of things you can do to help your child cope with changes and transitions:

- 1) Talk with your child about his or her feelings. Keep in mind that your child's feelings about a particular change may be different than yours! If your child is experiencing negative feelings about a change (e.g., anxiety, fear, sadness), certainly acknowledge those feelings, and at the same time do not let your child "marinate" in those feelings for too long.
- 2) Help your child find something to do – positive distraction and redirection can be a powerful coping skill for children! Get up and do something to help release physical energy and to get your child focused on something else: ride a bike, build a fort, dance to music, or play a game.
- 3) Give your child some warning about a change and provide more information as needed. For example, if your child will be attending a new activity or program, show him or her where it will be and give your child the opportunity to ask questions. For day-to-day transitions, offer a 2 minute warning before expecting your child to move from one activity to another (especially if you ask your child to go from a favorite activity to a less enticing activity). Praise your child for handling transitions well.
- 4) Create daily routines for your household. It is stabilizing for children to be able to predict what is going to happen each day. Establish regular mealtimes, bedtimes, and sequences for daily tasks (e.g., for bedtime: put on PJs, brush teeth, read a book, lights out).
- 5) Make sure all of the "biological basics" are in order. It is very important that your child is getting adequate sleep, engaging in exercise, and eating a well-balanced diet. When these basic needs are not met, problems can arise in many areas including learning and attention, mood regulation, and the ability to cope with the stresses of life.
- 6) Spend positive, quality time with your child on a regular basis. Even 10 minutes of your undivided attention is a powerful relationship builder and can foster feelings of stability amidst change.

If your child is having a particularly difficult time coping with a change, consider working with a licensed mental health professional to learn additional coping strategies and tools for your specific situation. Your child and family may simply need some extra support for certain changes or transitions.

While change can produce both positive and negative feelings, it is important to remember that change is a part of life.

"The only thing that is constant is change." – Heraclitus

Kim Painter, PhD, is a licensed psychologist in private practice in Summit, NJ. She specializes in working with children, adolescents, parents/caregivers, and families. She is particularly interested in treating behavior and attention disorders, anxiety, depression, parenting difficulties, and other family-related problems. In addition, Dr. Painter has expertise in working with individuals on the autism spectrum and others who also experience social skills deficits. She is the author of Social Skills Groups for Children and Adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome: A Step-by-Step Program.