

Making the Move Easy On the Kids

Moving from one house to another is seldom easy and fun for adults, and it can be especially troubling for children. But if parents deal with their children's concerns and needs thoughtfully, you can avoid much of that distress and discomfort.

1. The Children's Perspective

Children see moves differently than their parents do, and they benefit much less from the change in their comfortable routines – or so it seems at the time. Most often, a change in houses or communities heralds an important step forward for the adult members of the family. The family moves because Daddy or Mommy has a great new job, or a promotion in reward for years of hard work. They move because financial success has allowed the purchase of a bigger and nicer house in a more costly neighborhood, or because they can finally afford private bedrooms for each child and perhaps a pool in the backyard.

2. It's not Just a House – It's a Home

Nowadays, mobile and hard-striving people typically live in a house for about five years and then move on as their careers or fortunes allow. That short time span is only a small percentage of the life-to-date for a 30- or 40-year-old, but the same five years is half the lifetime of a 10-year-old, and it includes almost all the years he or she can remember. To a parent, this house may only be the place they've lived recently. They think of it as a way station on the road of life. To kids, however, it may be the only home they've ever really known. This is their house – the place they feel safe and comfortable.

A house is much more than a roof and walls to a child. It is the center of his or her world. A move threatens to take that sphere away and leave something totally strange in its place. The familiar friends, schools, shops and theaters, the streets, trees and parks – all will no longer exist for them. Everything will soon be strange, and they'll live in someone else's world.

3. How and When to Let Them Know

The impact of a move on a typical child starts about the time he or she first hears that a parent has accepted a promotion, and often continues for about a year, until the new house becomes home, and memories of the previous place fade. It's not usually necessary to announce this big change to children immediately, although they must hear about it from you before someone else breaks the news. Most teenagers see themselves as adult members of the family, and will probably feel they've been left out if they don't hear everything from the first day.

But it's probably not a good idea to tell toddlers and pre-schoolers until they have to know. There is no point in making them worry far in advance. Be sure to announce the move in a totally positive way. You might say how proud you are that Daddy's company has chosen him out of many other employees to manage a new office in Cleveland. Talk about what a beautiful city Cleveland is, how good the schools are and how nice the people are.

4. Handling Concerns

Tell truthful but very positive stories about how nice the new house will be. Ask them what the favorite things are in their lives now, and then try to make them happen in the new home. If the new home is too far away to allow a visit by the entire family, show the children pictures of it from every angle. Videotape it, if you can. Emphasize the positive views and be sure to include pictures of each child's new room. Try to name the house with some romantic description, like "Oak Hill" for the big trees and the sloping lawn.

Sugarcoating will help, but since children can quickly see the negative sides of most situations, every parent must plan to deal with their child's worries, fears and sorrows. The children will lose friends they may have known all their lives. They will leave behind their sports teams, their clubs and their dancing teachers. They will have to start over in a new place, making friends, becoming accepted, and fitting into different groups.

5. Get Them Involved

Younger children need protection from fear of the unknown. Listen carefully to their concerns, and respond quickly to allay their apprehensions. It would be normal, for instance, for a young child to worry that his or her toy box and shelf of stuffed animals might be left behind. Find those anxieties and correct them. Probably the best tactic is to get the children actively involved in the whole process. For example, 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 for bed spreads, towels and carpets.

6. Soften the Loss of Friends

They must leave old friends behind, so find ways to make that parting almost pleasant. Plan a going-away party and let them invite their own guests. Take pictures of everyone and make a photo album. If a child is old enough, send him or her out with a roll of film in the camera and the assignment to photograph the views they will want to remember.

Some relationships will be extremely difficult to break and these will demand careful, thoughtful, personalized planning by both parents. How, for instance, do you move a 17-year-old 1,000 miles from her steady boyfriend? Expect that your children may be even more distressed after the move than they were before it. The new house will not be beautiful the night after the moving van leaves, or for months after. The furniture won't fit the rooms. The curtains won't be up, and the floor will be covered with half-unpacked cartons. The children won't know anyone at school and, if you move during the summer, they may have little opportunity to meet anyone their age. You may be faced with many more problems in your new community than they will, but remember that you can handle them more easily than they can. They will need your help, and you should plan to give them the support they need.

After the move, give each of them a long distance telephone call allowance so they can keep in touch with the people back home who matter the most to them. Buy a stack of picture postcards that show positive views of your new community, and encourage them to write good news messages to the friends and relatives they left behind.

7. Help Them Get Started

To make new friends, make sure the children don't vegetate in front of the television. Get them outside, where neighbors pass by. Have them pass out fliers to do babysitting or car washing. Encourage them to participate in as many school activities as they can handle. Get them on sports teams and into clubs. If they – and you – aren't making new friends fast enough, throw a housewarming party for yourselves and invite all the adults and children on the block.

8. Transitional Resources

If serious emotional or attitudinal problems arise, help is usually available and you should consider getting it. Ask a teacher for help. Consider professional counseling. Don't let a serious problem slide. Remember that the newness will wear off. New friends will become old friends and best friends. This new house may become the family homestead your grandchildren will visit every holiday season. There will be discomforts, but in the long run, everything will work out fine.