



Change can be stressful for all people, young and old. It can be particularly stressful for young children as it can challenge their sense of safety, security and predictability of the world. Everyone including children go through a period when they experience high levels of anxiety and distress having to adjust and adapt to these changes. This adjustment time for children will often be demonstrated by their behaviour rather than in words. Some children, due to their personalities and/or life experiences may be more sensitive than others and exhibit more of these behaviours.

The types of change that children may find stressful include:

- birth of a new baby
- parental separation
- loss or death of a loved one
- moving home
- new parental partners
- starting school / preschool
- changing schools
- illness and hospitalisation
- parental unavailability due to parents' own issues – mental health problems, financial stress, personal stress, new job.

When children are struggling with change you may see differences in their behaviour:

- They may regress and revert to behaviours you experienced when they were younger – like asking for a pacifier or bottle again, day and/or

night wetting, baby talk, wanting to sleep in your bed or have you feed them

- Their behaviour may become difficult or challenging – refusing to do what they are told, attention seeking or temper tantrums
- They may become withdrawn, anxious, clingy and refuse to separate or exhibit angry or displaying aggressive behaviour
- They may experience difficulties around going to bed and sleeping- not wanting to separate to go to bed, taking longer to fall asleep or awakening during the night with bad dreams
- They may complain of stomach or headaches or seem overly sensitive to minor bumps and scrapes
- They may lose interest in things which previously interested or entertained them
- They may experience difficulties concentrating at school

There are numerous ways that adults can help contain these anxieties and support children through a stressful time:

- Reassure and show them they are loved and supported
- Encourage questions and discussions about change and feelings
- Prepare them before a significant change by talking about it, as this gives them time to adjust
- Stick to facts without too much detail if it is a negative event
- Tell stories or use tools to help children understand change (there are many good books on this topic available on the internet)
- Encourage them to draw how they are feeling
- Keep other care providers informed (grandparents, teachers or child care workers)

- Don't change too many other things at the same time. For example, attempting toilet training for your toddler when a new baby arrives may not be a good idea. Wait until everything settles into a routine.
- Make special time for them to still do the things you have enjoyed together
- Keep things as routine as possible
- If a planned change involves moving to a new house or room the child may feel less anxious about the change if you take photos of the house or room beforehand so that they will be able to remember it. This may be comforting for some children

If the change is about parental separation / divorce:

- Keep the children out of the nasty details – For example, they don't necessarily need to know someone was having an affair
- Reassure them that both parents love them and that won't change

If the change is a new baby in the family:

- prepare them before the birth with a simple explanation and involvement in the pregnancy
- involve them – if they are preschool age get them a doll or baby of their own
- use aides like the “our baby's growth chart” from www.childhoodcharts.com and various books available on the topic
- involve them- they could help choose the new baby's clothes
- plan as much as possible
- show them how to interact with and touch the baby

Children's adjustments to change are many and varied however, with supportive caring management the behavioural responses are often short lived. If, however, you child's reactions seem severe and lasting or you are unsure

how to help, talk with your doctor or seek help from a qualified child psychologist.

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