

Helping Your Child Deal with New Experiences and Major Changes



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Very young children may become anxious about impending change, particularly when it involves something that seems big and very different from anything in the past. Examples might include a first long airplane flight or the switch to a new school. You can help your child deal with fear of the unknown in several basic ways to which you can add as you remember what worked for you as a kid. If you take the right approach and adopt a broad view of the job to be done, you will be giving your child tools for dealing with change not just right now but also in the future.

Let's say you are planning for a first airplane trip. You might discuss preparations such as deciding which clothing and supplies to take along, packing the suitcase, transportation from the parking lot to the terminal, safety in airport crowds, and the procedure at security check points. You can also talk about the airport's layout, ticketing before a flight, and the actual experience of flight, from takeoff to landing.

The more your child understands about what will be involved, the more prepared he or she will feel. Hands-on activities stay in memory the best, and pictures are more memorable than spoken words. You could get your child books about airplanes that show them inside and out. You might even help your child construct a model airplane or fly a glider made out of balsa wood. You could also use a map to trace the flight path.

You and your child might visit an airport to see the ticket counters and security area and to watch the planes through the fence around the runway. You may be able to arrange a tour of an empty airplane sitting at the gate. To ensure that the first experience is positive, you might plan for special treats and fun activities during the flight.

You will want to debrief your child after the fact. Was the flight as expected? What was the best part? And so forth. Special interests and talents may help your child celebrate some big firsts, perhaps by writing a poem, drawing or painting a picture, taking photos, or even creating a video about the experience. Airports often sell small airplanes or T shirts as souvenirs.

If the big change will be a move to a different city or switching to a different school, you may want to help your child commemorate the old as well as prepare for the new. The two of you could make a scrapbook or memory box about the old home or school, including photos of people and places. A school collection might include report cards, certificates, homework, and even test papers. If you have enough lead time, your child can collect farewell messages from neighbors, teachers, and friends in an old-fashioned autograph book.

As the new place becomes familiar, keep the memorabilia from the old one handy so that your child can visit them at any time and finish saying goodbye. The scrapbook or memory box provides a physical space for reminiscing. Particularly when there is a move from one neighborhood or community to another, your child will appreciate a chance to reconnect with old friends by phone, by mail or email, and during occasional visits.

Visit a new school before the classes start. Introduce your child to some of the staff. Let him or her walk through the building, learn how to get to the classrooms and the restroom, and meet the new teachers. It may also be helpful to find a classmate who can act as a buddy.

Gathering information and rehearsing the new experience—for example, by exploring the airplane and visiting a new school before the chaotic first day—are ways of helping your child make room for new learning while minimizing the anxiety involved. You can adapt the same approaches to other situations such as a first experience of day or overnight camp.

In each case, the greater our knowledge about the future, the better equipped we feel to deal with it, because we know what to expect. The best preparation likens each novelty to things that are already familiar. In this way, past learning makes it easier to tackle fresh challenges.