

## **Helping Young Children Cope With Change**

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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 of time 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 communicated by and reflected in 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
- moving home
- new parental partners
- starting school / preschool
- illness and hospitalization

- 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 dummy or bottle again or wetting again, baby talk, wanting to sleep in your bed or have you feed them again
- They may become difficult or challenging behaviourally – refusing to do what they are told, attention seeking or temper tantrums
- They may become withdrawn, anxious and clingy to you, refuse to separate or exhibit angry, acting out or aggressive behaviour
- They may complain of tummy or head aches or seem overly sensitive to minor bumps and scrapes
- They may lose interest in things they previously were interested in
- Older children may experience difficulties concentrating at school

If the child is managed in a supportive caring way these responses are often short lived. If however the reactions seem severe and lasting or you are unsure how to help seek help from a qualified child psychologist.

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

- Reassure and show them they are loved and supported
- Encourage questions and discussions about change and feelings
- Prepare them beforehand whenever possible which gives them time to adjust
- Stick to facts without too much detail if it's a nasty 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)
- If the change is about parental separation / divorce
  - keep the children out of the nasty details – they don't need to know someone was having an affair etc.
  - 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 hand with a simple explanation
  - involve them – if they are preschool age get them a doll or baby of their one
  - use aides like the “our baby's growth chart” from [www.childhoodcharts.com](http://www.childhoodcharts.com) and various books available on the topic
  - they could help choose the babies clothes
  - plan ahead as much as possible
  - show them how to interact and touch the baby
- Don't change too many other things at the same time. .
- Make special time for them.
- Keep things as routine as possible
- Sometimes photos of things as they were can help children feel secure if they are changing houses or rooms

Terri Sheldon and Dr Peta Stapleton are psychologists with over 36 years combined clinical experience. They both work in private practise on the Gold Coast in Queensland.. To read more about the authors visit [www.terrisheldon.com.au](http://www.terrisheldon.com.au) and [www.petastapleton.com](http://www.petastapleton.com)