

helping kids cope with change

Whether it's the birth of a baby, starting school or the loss of a loved one, children can find change challenging. Here psychologists Terri Sheldon and Dr Peta Stapleton offer their advice

Change can be stressful for all people, whether they're young or old, but it can be particularly difficult for kids

as it can challenge their sense of safety, security and predictability within their world.

Everyone, including children, goes through periods of time when they experience high levels of anxiety and distress as they adjust and adapt to change. For young children, the way they cope with this phase will often be demonstrated by their behaviour rather than in words. Some kids, due to their personalities and/or life experiences, may be more sensitive than others and exhibit more of these reactive behaviours.

The types of change that children may find stressful include the birth of a new baby, parental separation, loss or death of a loved one, moving home, new parental partners, starting or changing preschool or school, illness and hospitalisation, and parental unavailability due to a parent's own issues, including mental health problems, a new job, financial stress or personal stress.

BEHAVIOURAL DIFFERENCES

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

- They may regress and revert to behaviours from when they were younger, like asking for a bottle again, day and/or night wetting, baby talk or wanting to sleep in your bed.
- Their behaviour may become challenging or difficult, such as refusing to do what they're told,

attention seeking or throwing temper tantrums.

- They may become withdrawn, anxious and clingy, and exhibit angry or aggressive behaviour.
- They may experience difficulties around going to bed and sleeping, including not wanting to separate to go to bed, taking longer to fall asleep or waking up during the night with bad dreams.
- They may complain of headaches or stomach pains, or seem overly sensitive to minor scrapes.
- They may lose interest in things that previously interested or entertained them.
- They may experience difficulties concentrating at school.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

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

- Reassure them and show them they are loved.
- Encourage them to ask questions and discuss the change and their feelings about it.
- Prepare them before a significant change by talking about it, as this gives them time to adjust.
- Stick to the facts without giving too much detail if it is a negative event.
- Tell stories or use tools such as books to help children understand change.
- Encourage them to draw how they are feeling.
- Keep other care providers informed, such as grandparents, teachers or childcare workers.
- Don't change too many other things at the same time. For example, trying to toilet train a toddler

when a new baby arrives might not be a good idea – wait until everything settles into a routine.

- Make special time for your family to still do the things you enjoy together.
- Keep everything else as routine as possible.

If the change is about parental separation or divorce, keep the children out of any 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 this won't alter.

If the change is a new baby in the family, prepare them before the birth with a simple explanation and by involving them in the pregnancy. You could also get them a doll or "baby" of their own, use aids like the Our Baby's Growth Chart (see below) and various books available on the topic, and involve them wherever possible, such as in choosing the new baby's clothes. Try to plan ahead as much as you can, and show them how to interact with and touch the baby.

Children adjust to change in many and varied ways but with supportive, caring management the behavioural responses are often short-lived. If, however, your child's reactions seem severe and lasting, or you are unsure about how to help, talk with your GP or seek assistance from a qualified child psychologist. ●

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WIN A BABY GROWTH CHART

Aimed at helping children engage with the idea of having a little brother or sister, the Our Baby's Growth Chart by Childhood Charts is fun and easy to use. Starting in the second trimester, it follows the developmental milestones in the 28 weeks leading up to the birth. For your chance to win one of 25 Our Baby's Growth Charts worth \$29.95 each, head to mychildmagazine.com.au to enter and to childhoodcharts.com for more details.

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