

All change

Moving house? New childcare? Those big changes don't have to mean huge dramas for your little ones. We reveal how to keep your child feeling happy and secure

Most adults find big changes unsettling, but for small children any alteration to their routine can be stressful. When it comes to life-changing events, such as moving house, having a new sibling or parents separating, the impact on toddlers and pre-schoolers can be huge – and as parents, we shouldn't underestimate this. By putting ourselves in their shoes, we can get an idea of how each scenario might seem from our children's point of view and how we can help them.

The first step to easing little ones through change is to get down to their level, says Alexandra Maeja Raicar, psychoanalytic psychotherapist and founder of the Child-Centred Attachment Therapy (CAT) programme. 'Children may not understand expressions such as "moving house" and wonder, "How do you move a house?" By using toys or drawings, you can give them a point of reference that will help them understand.'

'With very young children, the key is to make changes seem normal rather than making a huge fuss,' says Rosemary Wells, author of *Helping Children Cope With Change and Loss* (Sheldon Press, £6.99). 'Talk to them as much as possible and focus on all the good things about the change.'

Change isn't something you should shelter your children from – it's unavoidable, and the last thing you want to do is make your little one afraid of the transitions he'll face in life. It's how you go about dealing with change that makes all the difference.

Starting nursery

'Arranging a playdate with other children who will be in their class beforehand will help prepare them for being with lots of children – especially if they're an only child,' says Rosemary. 'This is much more important than them knowing how to read. Teach them to go to the loo and sort themselves

'My first sleepover - I'm so excited (even if it's only at Granny's)'

out afterwards, so they're ready to cope at nursery. Some nurseries allow children to attend for two hours a day and gradually build up. Tell them what time mummy, or someone else, is coming to get them so they know what to expect.'

'Before our girls started pre-school, we visited the classroom together,' says Jane, 35, mum to Evie, 10, Annabel, 6, and Katie, 4. 'We talked about what would happen when they got to nursery, and went shopping for books to prepare them. We also made sure that they were potty-trained, as this could have made them insecure or nervous.'

Going on holiday

It's not just permanent changes that can be stressful. Any alteration to your usual routine, like a holiday or a short stay with relatives at Christmas or Easter, can have an effect.

If the place you're visiting is very different from home, Alexandra Maeja Raicar suggests showing your child videos of where you're going. 'Prepare your child for the long journey and make sure he has his favourite toy or comforter. And where possible, stick to some parts of his old routine. Also, try to imagine yourself being a little child, to remember how strange adult life can seem.'

'We have a mobile with music that helps lull our children to sleep,' says Lindsay, 39, mum to Ellen, 4, and Honor, 18 months. 'When we went away, they couldn't sleep and it was



'I'll be okay, but I'm not sure about teddy...'

Starting childcare

Parenting author Rosemary Wells says, 'If your child's never been left without her mum or dad before, she's going to feel it. If you just say, "Mummy's going to work," she can't picture it and might think you're never coming back! Show her a clock and say, "When the little hand gets to there, I'll be back home."'

'I'd been leaving Ashley with my in-laws since going back to work when she was 14 months,' says Charmaine, 36, mum to Ashley, 20 months. 'They moved away when Ashley was 18 months but, while they were still there,

I found a childminder who lived nearby and I started leaving Ashley with her for longer and longer periods. I don't sneak away and she's even started waving me off each morning now, because she understands that I'll be back later.'

really difficult. The next time we were away from home, I dismantled the mobile and just took the part that played the music. They slept fine and now I take it everywhere.'

Family break-up

Splitting up is painful and stressful enough for you, but at least you understand why things haven't worked out. 'From your child's perspective, the two people he's

closest to are no longer getting on,' says Raicar. 'Perhaps you're having arguments and being angry and hurtful towards each other. Even if they don't understand the words you use, children will pick up non-verbally that you don't like each other.'

'Because small children tend to see themselves as the centre of everything, they might feel that they made the parent go away or that they weren't good enough,' Raicar continues. 'If one parent is leaving, the child should see where they'll be living, so he can picture them there. A photo of the absent parent will help your child.'

'At 4, Millie's too young to fully understand that her dad and I have separated,' says Imogen, 30. 'We're talking about it in simple terms so we don't overwhelm her, but she knows that we're going to be living in different houses. I've been acting normally about the whole thing, as if it's not a big deal. I think if she sees me upset, she'll feel it too.'

'She knows she's loved and that's the most important thing. It helps that my new partner has children already. We pretended to bump into each other and Millie took an immediate shine to his kids. She invited them all to Legoland the

next day, so it was as if getting to know them was her own decision.'

Moving house

'Going to live in a new home is a completely new environment,' says Raicar. 'Everything's strange and can feel overwhelming. Some children find change exciting, whereas others might get anxious and clingy. Reassure them that their parents or carers will still be around.'

'Once you know you're going ahead with the move, involve your little one as fully as possible. Get him to help pack his own things. Create a little book with him as the heroine or hero and include photos of the new house and the room he might be moving into. If he's changing nurseries, show him a picture of the new one. Explain what's happening several times so it becomes familiar.'

'When Grace was a baby, we lived with my in-laws,' says Michelle, 34, mum to Grace, 5, Ezra, 3, and Lisa, 7 months. 'She was 2½ when we got our own house, and was really excited. But when we visited granny and granddad, Grace panicked that we wouldn't be going home. We talked it through with her, saying, "We still live in our house, and we're just visiting here." It took about six months, and then she was fine.' **PP**

5 mum tips for coping with change

1 'When you move, kit out their new rooms

with a few things they choose themselves to make it into a treat.' Imogen, 30, mum to Millie, 4.

2 'Have a simple routine for bedtime so you can replicate it anywhere you go. Even if the other routines can't be done, sticking to the bedtime routine really helps.' Lindsay, 39, mum to Ellen, 4 and Honor, 18 months.

3 'We tell Lana, "You're going to make a great big sister" and that she'll be able to do this and that, so she knows she's still really important. We'll also

buy her a present from the baby.' Sara, 30, mum to Lana, 2.

4 'When I was pregnant, I'd take James with me to see the midwife to monitor Chloe's heartbeat. We also gave him a new bed quite early on, so when Chloe came along, he didn't miss the cot and wasn't jealous.' Deborah, 34, mum to James, 4, and Chloe, 2.

5 'With any change, talk it through and be patient. They may not get it the first time, and you may have to repeat it over and over again, but keep reassuring them.' Michelle, 34, mum to Grace, 5, Ezra, 3, and Lisa, 7 months.