

Coping with change

Moving on – New home, new classroom, new situations

by Roslyn Duffy

Situation

Meghan has lived all of her three-and-a-half years in a one-bedroom apartment with her mom in downtown Chicago. Next week they are moving to a small cottage with its own yard and even a swing set! Meghan is very excited. So, why has she suddenly begun hitting children at child care? This isn't like her!

When Elias turned four, he transferred into the 'big kids' pre-k classroom, which he'd been begging to join. His parents were confident he would flourish. However, within a week he was having daily toileting accidents. What was going on?

Peggy and Sari have been best friends from the day they met in preschool as two year olds. Now, at five, Sari's family is moving to another city. But something is wrong. Instead of playing, Sari and Peggy fight all day long. What has gone wrong?



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Solution

Only obvious from the outside

When laid out like this, the connection between misbehavior and a move, a change of classroom, or leaving a friend behind seems obvious. However, that connection isn't always clear. Though the responses may be 'common' and the situations 'typical,' children's emotions do not feel that way to them. Unfamiliar feelings of sadness, fear, and loss are 'acted out' as aggression, lack of toileting control, or ruptured relationships.

Emotions, with that all-important base word of 'motion,' are meant to 'move' through and out of our bodies as we process them. Without help, young children use the only 'movement' strategies they have — physical responses.

Easing emotions along

The movement of an emotion through our bodies does not have to lead to hurtful behaviors. We can help children with the process with three strategies:

- We raise our awareness by recognizing and anticipating the impact of change on a child's life. Big changes,

like moving, are easiest to recognize, but a change of teacher, the absence of a friend, or even vacation time away from school, can trigger strong emotions. If we become alert to these possibilities, we can anticipate and respond to them.

- We help children process (or move through) emotions. This happens through communication — both sharing our own stories and thoughts and listening to theirs.
- We name emotions and increase a child's understanding of them. This reassures them that they are understood, that we all have emotions, and that all emotions are acceptable — and survivable.

Awareness

In the first example where Meghan's mom is planning their move from an apartment to a house, Meghan's mom viewed the change as an improvement so she did not expect problems. The same was true of Elias' parents who had been badgered endlessly to move him to the new classroom. And though Peggy and Shari's families' had anticipated tears, they did not foresee meanness and fighting.

Whenever something changes in a child's life, it has an emotional impact. For some, the impact will be subdued and its passage smooth. However, for many, emotions will be intense and disruptive. The good news is that when we anticipate a child's distress, our awareness alerts us to the possible need for help.

Processing

Talking allows our emotions to move through and out of our bodies — as do art, writing, and play. Once out, feelings become less toxic and cease to build pressure within us.

Jamil threw a small bowl and broke it during morning preschool. His exasperated teacher found him sobbing. She sat with him and he told her, "My Auntie is moving far away," then continued to cry. The teacher helped him draw a farewell picture for his Auntie. Only afterwards were they able to address the broken bowl, which he offered to replace by doing special chores around the classroom.

When we deal with misbehavior before feelings, we put the cart before the horse. Both need to be addressed, but once we help children process feelings, space for healing opens up. Recent studies on empathy show that when one child pushes another and is asked, "How do you think Ben feels?" it is less effective than when we start with the child's own feelings: "You look really upset." This second approach puts the child in touch with her emotions, a prerequisite to relating to others, and is the foundation of empathy. Once a child understands and processes her own emotions, she can relate to the emotions of another. This also provides language for future use: "I feel upset like I did when I pushed Ben down."

Tools for Changes

Moves:

- Involve a child in planning what to take and what to do with things left behind: bring them to local charities or give things to friends.
- Visit or look at pictures of the new place to make it familiar.
- Allow a child to choose a special item for the new space: a small rug, lamp, or bed sheets.
- Select items to commemorate the current place: a cutting from a plant, pressed leaves, or small garden pebbles.
- Go room to room creating a picture montage of your 'old home.'
- Say "good-bye." (At about age three, children can share their memories, too.)
 "Remember the birthday piñata that we hung from this doorway?"
 "Yes. Angie hit it the hardest."
 "You and I made lots of cookies at this countertop."
 "I used to need a stool to reach that high!"
Note: This may well be a sad and tearful task, but remember, we are interested in 'moving' emotions through and out of our bodies — a process that heals.

Temporary (or Short-Term) Changes:

(Vacations, school breaks, a teacher on maternity leave, etc.)

- Involve a child in deciding what to take with him: a favorite book or familiar toy.
- Bring 'soothers': blankies, pacifiers, favorite bedtime items.
Note: If there is only one ragged and disintegrating blankie, consider clipping a corner to take along rather than risk losing the whole item — or establish two items, one for travel and one for home.
- Identify a space in the new environment as a 'sanctuary,' a place the child can go to when she feels overwhelmed or needs time alone.
- If this place is visited regularly (for example, a grandparent or other relative's home), designate a drawer or even a small box for toys and supplies to be stored during and between visits.

Classroom or Teacher Changes:

- Plan a goodbye: Prepare treats to share with classmates; draw a picture for a departing teacher or the one being left behind; give a good-bye book as a class gift.
- Go back (if possible): Re-visit the previous classroom or school after a few weeks. This completes a transition as the returning child sees the old place as different without him.
- Provide a welcome (in the new place): Identify coat hooks, cubby spaces, and other items with a child's name.
- Visit the new place to gain familiarity.
- Meet the teacher and new classmates (if possible).
Note: The more connected we feel to the new situation, the easier to let go of the old.

We move to something — not only away from something else.

Books can initiate conversations. Reading a story is an excellent strategy for introducing the topic for discussion.

- We identify similarities between the character's situation and the child's by asking questions: "Do you think our move to Kentucky is like bear's family moving?" Questions engage a child in the process and allow him to discover connections and personal meaning.
- What the story character does (or doesn't do) can be a model to imitate or something to avoid: "Do you think it helped for elephant to fight with his friend when he felt sad?"
- Use stories to brainstorm alternatives: "Have you ever felt sad? What did you do? What else might elephant have done?"
- Tools, such as drawing, writing (for older children), and play also help a child to articulate feelings and process emotions. It is safer (for everyone) to draw a picture of throwing blocks, rather than actually doing so.

Naming and understanding

Books help us to name and recognize emotions. The rabbit hiding behind a bush embodies fear; the child with a stomachache on test day exemplifies anxiety; the little girl pressing her face against a car window for a last sighting of her house communicates sadness.

Sharing our stories does this, too. Remember how hard it was to leave Jimmy, our long-ago friend behind; having to use a sweater sleeve to mop up tears the first day of school; or the exhilaration and nervousness before our month-long visits to Grandma's farm each summer? All of these stories let a child know that we understand her feelings and experience similar ones ourselves. She is not alone. The unspoken message is that if Dad felt this way once and he is okay, then maybe I, too, will be okay.

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Resource Books

Boomer's Big Day by Constance W. McGeorge (Chronicle Books, 1994)

This is about a family dog's confusion on moving day. Young children will relate to it well — and the pictures are wonderful.

Alexander, Who's Not (Do you hear me? I mean it!) *Going to Move* by Judith Viorst (Atheneum, 1998)

Although this is an older child's story, it remains a timeless classic as it shows a child processing (with wonderful reluctance!) the many aspects of moving and leaving behind all that is familiar.

What problems do you experience?
Send a description, a short word 'snapshot' of the situation.

Each issue, we will address your real-life issues.
To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear.

Elements of several problems may be combined for this column.
Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.