

7 Ways to Help Kids Cope with Big Life Changes

by Ashley Cullins March 28, 2019

THIS ARTICLE INCLUDES A FREE PRINTABLE

Big life changes are inevitable, but that doesn't make them any easier for children (or adults) to manage. Structure and stability feel safe to children, so new experiences like divorce, moving, attending a new school, or welcoming a baby sibling can be scary.

As we face changes, we develop the skills of [resilience](#). By navigating and growing from these experiences, we strengthen and train our "resilience muscle." Children who are new to major life changes need extra support in addressing their feelings, understanding and adjusting to change, and learning new strategies and skills along the way.

Remember that children [feel our emotions](#), so start by acknowledging and regulating your *own* feelings about the big change.

Once you're composed and ready to guide your child through this time of transition, try the seven strategies below. These effective **strategies** will help your child feel safe, adjust, and build [resilience](#).

Connecting with your child is one of the important steps in helping your child cope with changes. Activities do not have to be complicated or over-the-top. Simple, meaningful connections can build relationships, create bonds and bring fun to your days.

1. Give Them Time to Prepare

With some changes, like the unexpected death of a loved one, preparation isn't possible. But when preparation *is* an option, give your child plenty of advance warning that a major change is coming. This allows them time to **process** and begin to **accept** the change.

It also gives you time to familiarize your child with the unfamiliar. If you're moving, take your child to look at the new house and/or new school. Arrange for your child to meet the teacher in advance. Ask the teacher to talk to your child about what a typical day is like at the new school, give a brief tour of the classroom, or even show photos of other students and fun activities. If the life change is divorce, show the child where the other parent will be living. Point out which room will belong to them. Take them on a tour of the neighborhood and highlight any interesting or exciting features.

If you're having a baby, show your children pictures of themselves as babies. Talk about what to expect when the new baby comes and all the ways your children can be great big brothers or sisters.

2. Listen to Their Concerns

While you'll want to focus on the [positives](#) associated with the big life change, also take time to address your child's questions and concerns. Help them work through the emotions that they're feeling.

Often, children simply want [empathy and understanding](#). Acknowledge and **validate their feelings** without being too quick to distract them or try to shield them from their emotions. Coaching children through their emotions is a vital learning experience; shielding them teaches nothing.

Say something like, *"Moving to a new place can feel sad and scary. It's okay to feel that way. Let's take some deep breaths together. We can handle this."*

If your child struggles to name what he is feeling, help him label the emotion (e.g., anxious, sad, nervous, worried, or scared). Putting a **name** to the feeling makes it less overwhelming and easier to manage.

Print out our **My Emotions Fan** in our [Growth Mindset Activity Kit](#). This fun activity gives kids a chance to exercise their creativity and learn more about different types of emotions!

When possible, also give your children strategies to handle some of the more challenging aspects of the [new situation](#). If your child is concerned about when he will see the other parent after a divorce, for example, buy a calendar and put stickers on each day he will spend with the other parent.

If he's worried that you will never spend time with him after the new baby comes, talk about different activities that you will still do together. Remind him that he can still ask for an extra hug or kiss whenever he needs it.

For children who are moving to a new [school](#) and anxious about making friends, roleplay potential scenarios and conversations.

You won't have the answer to everything, and that's okay. If you can't think of a comforting strategy to provide, simply ensure that your child feels heard and acknowledged.

If you're looking for activities and guides to help you and your child, the [Self-Esteem Kit](#) is a collection of printable worksheets and activities for children to help develop high self-esteem and confidence. With this kit, kids will learn how to overcome their negative self-talk and start believing in themselves and their abilities.

3. Read Books About Big Life Changes

There are plenty of children's books written to help kids cope with major life changes. Here are a few examples.

Divorce:

- [It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear](#) by Vicki Lansky: The story of a lovable bear who doesn't want to have two homes, this book reassures children that their feelings are natural, their parents will still love and care for them, and the divorce is not their fault. Each page also contains bullet points giving parents advice for understanding and responding to what their children are experiencing.
- [Two Homes](#) by Claire Masurel: Alex has two favorite chairs: a rocking chair at Daddy's and a soft chair at Mommy's. Through small details like these, "Two Homes" focuses on what is gained rather than what is lost. It conveys that no matter which parent he's with, Alex knows that he is safe and loved. Even the illustrations are comforting and warm.
- [The Invisible String](#) by Patrice Karst: Applicable to any type of separation or loss, this heartwarming picture book is about the invisible and unbreakable bonds that connect us to our loved ones, no matter where they are.

New Baby:

- [You Were the First](#) by Patricia McLachlan: *"You were the first to teach us how to be parents."* A touching celebration of firstborn children, this book walks your child through the milestones of babyhood while reassuring him that no matter who else comes along, he will always be the first.
- [Babies Don't Eat Pizza: A Big Kid's Book About Baby Brothers and Sisters](#) by Dianne Danzig: This book blends matter-of-fact information with kid-friendly humor to answer all the questions new big siblings have. The book refers to the new sibling as "your baby" and frequently references readers' own babyhood. Practical tips for parents are included, too.
- [One Special Day: A Story for Big Brothers and Sisters](#) by Lola M. Schaefer: This beautifully illustrated story focuses on Spencer, who is silly and strong. When the new baby arrives, he also learns to be gentle. It's less about the new baby and more about how exciting it is to become an older sibling. With no reference to pregnancy or birth, it's also perfect for adoptive and foster families.

Moving:

- [Moving to the Neighborhood \(Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood\)](#) by Jason Fruchter: In this sweet board book, Daniel Tiger gets a new neighbor. Moving is scary at first, but the new neighbor soon feels right at home.
- [A Kiss Goodbye](#) by Audrey Penn: Chester the raccoon, of the beloved story "The Kissing Hand," is moving. This book walks readers through Chester's journey of saying goodbye to his home, plus learning to embrace the exciting features of his new home.
- [My Very Exciting, Sorta Scary Big Move](#) by Lori Attanasio Woodring: Written by a child psychologist, this story/workbook walks children ages 5-11 step-by-step through the moving process, including strategies for understanding change, managing emotions, saying goodbye and staying in touch, making new friends, and more.

These books help your child understand that he is not alone in experiencing this type of change. They also provide encouraging words, helpful advice, and the knowledge that everything will be okay in the end.

If you're looking for a great list of growth mindset books that cover a variety of topics, check out our **Top 85 Growth Mindset Books for Children and Adults** available in our [Growth Mindset Printables Kit](#).

4. Keep Routines the Same

When a major change happens, it's important to give your child as much consistency and stability as possible.

Do your best to stick to your usual schedule and [routines](#), and don't facilitate any additional changes that may further upset your child. For instance, don't move your child from the crib to a new bed while he's already feeling anxious about becoming a big brother.

[Bedtimes](#) and mealtimes, in particular, should remain consistent. The structure feels safe for children, so provide as much of it as possible to restore a sense of safety.

If you're moving to a new house or if your child will be spending time at a second home after a divorce, try to set the room up like the child's room at home. Give your child time to play with the same toys, read the same books, and do any [family rituals](#) that you enjoy.

Plus, getting plenty of rest and continuing to eat a nutritious diet helps your child feel better, happier, and calmer.

5. Provide Connection and Play

Another thing that should remain consistent is your child's [connection](#) with you. Make sure your child knows that no matter what else changes, you aren't going anywhere, and neither is the bond you have with your child.

You may be coping with the new changes and the extra stress that comes with it, but set aside even 10 minutes each day to give your child your undivided attention. Make eye contact, put the phone away, and be playful and affectionate.

Perhaps create a special [Big Life Journal](#) time with your child where you can sit together, read the journal stories and do a few pages. Grab your child's favorite snack and spend some quality time just focusing on your child. Check out our [Guide to Making the Most of Your Big Life Journal](#) for more fun and easy to implement ideas.

If your [child is older](#), provide joint attention: Watch the same movie, play a video game that your child enjoys, or share a meal at your child's favorite restaurant. Bond with your child by engaging in activities that he enjoys.

A little extra attention and parent-child playtime reassure your child that your love and care will remain consistent, making it much easier to cope with changes in other aspects of life.

6. Give Them Choices and Ask for Help

During a big life change, children feel that they have no control over their lives. Give some sense of agency by allowing your child to make small choices:

- What color does he want to paint his bedroom at the other parent's home?
- What should you cook for the first meal in the new house?
- What outfit does he want to wear for his first day at a new school?

The same goes for asking your child for help. Children like to [contribute and feel valuable](#), responsible, and helpful.

Ask your child if he has suggestions for the new baby's name, or to provide input on choosing a new house. Depending on the child's age, he can help move boxes, pack items, and otherwise assist with a move.

And there are plenty of ways big brothers and sisters can feel special and important by helping with a new baby. For young children, your requests can be simple, like bringing you the baby's blanket or helping you sing a lullaby (even if they don't really know the words).

Right now, your child probably feels helpless. Address this feeling by providing opportunities to be helpful and to make decisions.

7. Talk About Other Changes

Discuss or even sketch your child's life path so far. What changes have already happened? Your child may have experienced

- Starting school
- Getting a new pet
- Joining the [soccer](#) team
- Going to first grade

Talk about why these changes happened. What was good and not so good about each change? What did your child learn from each experience? How did he get through it, and what coping skills has he learned? Discuss the idea that every time your child experiences a big change, he's [stronger and more prepared](#) for the next one.

Similarly, your child can draw a "Before" and "After" picture illustrating a change that he has already coped with successfully. Talk about the experience of that change using the same questions described above.

By now, these once terrifying changes are probably a normal part of life that no longer feel scary or overwhelming. Discussing the changes that are now in the past can help put the current situation in perspective.

Our [Three Seas Conversation Cards](#) is a beautifully illustrated deck of cards with 52 interesting questions to help kids and grown-ups share thoughtful discussions about kindness, resilience, gratitude, and more. These questions can help you get **conversations** started with your kids to help build connection during tough times.

It may feel scary now, but you and your child will adjust to the change together. Along the way, you'll learn new strategies and skills for handling the changes that inevitably occur in life.