



Tips for caregivers on preparing children for change

Understanding that change can be difficult for people of all ages, here are some tips for helping the children in your care prepare for what's next.



Care for the caregiver

First things first, take stock of how you – the caregiver – is feeling about changes in your daily routine. Whether it's going to the office or children headed to daycare or school, it's important to get yourself into a healthy head and heart space for the change. This is for your own health and well-being, and also because children take behavioral cues from the adults they rely on. So, take care of yourself – get enough sleep, move your body, find time to relax, etc., so you can approach the situation as positively as possible.

That doesn't mean you need to mask what you're thinking and feeling. It's OK, for example, to acknowledge you feel sad or anxious. But do so briefly and in a calm manner, while also being sure to communicate the benefits of the change for you and those in your care. The benefits will depend on your individual circumstances, but could include getting to spend time with friends, learning new things, taking part in fun activities, and the like. For older children, it might also help them to understand the realities of why the change is necessary, whether that be for financial welfare, personal fulfillment or whatever other reasons.



Practice the new routine

Once you're ready and set to go, you can begin taking steps to help the children in your care prepare for what's to come.

For very small children who may never have been out of the family fold or don't remember much about it, it can be helpful to take baby steps to help them grow comfortable. For example, if their schedule will change, begin practicing and role-playing it. Meaning, if they will need to wake up, eat breakfast and be out the door by a certain time, steadily get them into the new schedule. It can also be helpful to help young children understand the new schedule by role-playing waking up, getting ready, eating breakfast and leaving the home, for example, with toys or through stories.

Older children also should be conditioned to their new schedule and routine in advance. Talk them through the schedule changes they'll face, and start taking actions to get them used to the new routine, including initiating any new bed and wake-up times.

It's also helpful to introduce children to new caregiver(s) or teacher(s) or refamiliarize them with previous ones in advance, if possible. You also can help them get comfortable by showing them where they will be, how they'll get there and how they'll get home. Meaning, if possible, walk or drive them through the new routine so they understand it, or, show them through photographs you find online. Especially if they need to take steps on their own, such as catching a bus or walking to school, practice the route with them until you and they feel confident they know their way.

Also, if possible, set up play or hang-out dates with the friends they may have not seen in a while. Or, if they'll be attending a new school or daycare experience, consider reaching out to the caregivers of other children they'll be seeing in class to set up fun get togethers. Reconnecting with friends or becoming familiar with potential new friends in advance can help them look forward with more enthusiasm and comfort knowing they'll see a friendly face upon arrival. (You also will likely feel more comfortable about the situation.)



Nurture their resiliency

Help children grow accustomed to the change. For example, if your child will be attending daycare or starting a new school and is used to being with you nearby day and night, take short leaves of absences. Maybe start by having a friend or relative stay with them while you run a quick errand, and build from there. This can help them get used to the idea of you being gone and help them feel confident you'll return as expected. When you part ways, keep your goodbyes positive, calm and short – this less of a big deal you make of it, the less of a big deal it will likely seem to the children in your care.

If and when the children in your care do talk about how they're feeling about the upcoming transition, be sure to listen patiently. Try not to dismiss or marginalize their feelings. Also, keep in mind they may have mixed feelings about the change of events. For instance, they might be looking forward to seeing friends or re-engaging in certain activities, but they also might feel sad about missing you, scared going to a daycare or school, or something else.



For children who cannot or are reluctant to verbalize their emotions, take note of their behavior. Especially young children who are feeling anxious or afraid may become clingier and fussier. Older children's behavior might also shift, such as by becoming more withdrawn or more animated than their usual selves, or exhibit regressive behaviors, such as acting younger or needier.

In all cases, try to help them work through what they're thinking and feeling. For example, if they're scared or anxious, guide them to help them remember other times they felt like that, what they did to get through it, how they go through it, and what they learned from it. This will help build their confidence in themselves and nurture their overall resilience.



Begin the new routine

When the time comes, follow suit with all that you've prepared for and practiced. Barring unforeseen circumstances, stick as closely as possible to the routine you've shared with the children in your care. Then, look forward to building on your initial "launch" and doing it all over again the next day and the next ...

As time passes, the change in routine will become familiar and comfortable. And, hopefully, sooner than later, you can all look back rest assured that once again you successfully made it through yet another transition.



If you need a little more support, reach out to your Employee Assistance Program.



Critical support when you need it

Visit optumeap.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.

SOURCES:

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