

The American Counseling Association's "*Counseling Corner*" Weekly Columns

Making Change Less Stressful For Your Children

from the American Counseling Association

Many parents see schools' summer vacations as a time when their children can relax, have fun and escape the demands of the school year. But summer can also be a time of stress and anxiety for many children.

As the schedules and known activities of the school year end, children face a summer that may be full of uncertainty. It's also a time of year when major changes are most likely to occur.

Some changes are fairly minor: spending a week with relatives, playing on a new soccer or baseball team, going to camp. But other changes can be major: moving to a new home or starting a new school at summer's end.

An important life skill is learning to handle change, but a great many children are "change-sensitive." Confronted with something new or different, they may become overly nervous and anxious. That's when parents can do things to reduce stress levels and help prepare children to better handle future changes and transitions.

Start by discussing coming changes with the child. Most kids, even very young ones, quickly pick up clues of something different and then their imaginations can run wild. It's important to discuss what will really be happening and when. Answering questions will help make the transition more understandable and less stressful.

For younger children, it especially helps to provide the child with visual information. For a new house, going there for a visit, or sharing pictures of a new bedroom, can help the child actually see what the change is bringing. For a new school, sports team or camp, again showing as much as possible will lessen anxiety. Maybe it's a walk around the school grounds or the new soccer field. Maybe set up a short visit with a camp counselor or the new school's counselor.

A main objective is to give your child time to prepare for change. Surprising a child with a major change adds to everyone's stress and can produce long-lasting problems.

You also want to be reassuring, letting your child know that you understand how hard change can be, but that you're going to be there with support and love. Remind the child of how well he or she handled past changes.

It's natural to feel anxious about new things. But provide your child with a little preparation, understanding and support, and his or her stress and anxiety will be much lower.

Counseling Corner is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org

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