

Kids' Reactions to Relocation

Moving is a stressful time for parents and kids alike. It is helpful to understand how children of various ages and stages of development may react and what adults can do to help. Remember that during relocation, regression and changes in behavior due to stress and separation are normal.

What to Expect From Children of Different Ages

Infants (birth to 12 months)

When there are changes in the environment, the tendency to seek security is natural. Infants need to be surrounded by familiar people and objects, and secure routines.

Developmental milestones:

- Learning cause and effect.
- Developing motor skills including sitting, standing and crawling.
- Recognizing strangers.

What you may expect:

- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns.
- May want to be held more.
- May seem "fussier."
- May exhibit no reaction at all.

What you can do:

- Try to stay calm and relaxed. Infants generally will mirror your stress level.
- Be consistent and try to maintain a routine.
- Stay where your baby can see you.
- Pack your baby's items last and unpack them first.
- Attend to their needs. Find time to hold and comfort them.



Toddlers (ages 1 to 3)

Not unlike infants, toddlers will react to environmental changes and their parents' stress. Secure routines and familiar people and objects remain of utmost importance.

Developmental milestones:

- Learning to control bodily functions (i.e., toilet training)
- Mastering fine motor skills.
- Learning to talk.
- Learning to walk.

What you may expect:

- May temporarily regress in walking or toilet training.
- May become clingy or whiny.
- May cry for no apparent reason.

What you can do:

- Prepare your child. Explain what is going to happen each step of the way in basic terms.
- Show him/her pictures of your new home and community.
- Avoid making other changes at the same time. This is not a good time to begin toilet training or move from the crib to a bed.
- Be sure to let them say goodbye before everything is packed.
- When you get to your new home, unpack some familiar objects quickly.
- Ignore attention-getting behaviors.



Preschoolers (ages 3 to 5)

Preschool children are beginning to exert their independence but still are very self-centered and dependent on parents when feeling insecure. They are curious, have an active imagination and may worry about being left behind or being separated from their parents.

Developmental milestones:

- Active imagination and magical thinking.
- Live in the here and now.
- Play is important.

What you may expect:

- Clinging to family or a favorite toy.
- Unexplained crying.
- Easily angered or frustrated.
- Nightmares or sleep difficulties.
- Fearful of new people or places.
- Regression in toilet habits or other areas of development.

What you can do:

- Allow them to express their feelings and fears about the move.
- Have them help pack their own boxes. Let them decorate the cartons.
- Allow them to help you pack. Let them see what you're doing.
- Include them in the moving activities and plans.
- Help them feel important. Give them a small job to do.
- Give them pictures of their new house and community. Talk about what it will be like.



School Age (ages 6 to 10)

School-age children have a world outside the family. Their lives focus on school and peers. They usually are concerned most about fitting in with peers and schoolwork and wonder how a move will affect the everyday routines of their lives.

Developmental milestones:

- Friendships and peer groups are important.
- Concern about rules and fairness.
- Curious. Ask questions to try to make sense of things.
- Seeking more independence and responsibility.

What you may expect:

- Change in school performance.
- Increase in complaints of physical ailments.
- Irritable and moody, frightened or angry.
- May internalize emotions.
- May lash out at siblings or parents.
- May be excited and anxious to move.

What you can do:

- Encourage your child to share his/her concerns or fears with you.
- Use tools such as a camera or journal, or take your son/daughter on a special "date" day to trigger discussion.
- Give your child time to say good-bye to friends and familiar places.
- Involve them in as many aspects of the move as possible. Let them make decisions if possible, such as which room will be theirs or what color to paint it.
- Show them pictures and videos of their new home and community.
- Find out about where they can continue sports and activities. See if they can be signed up in advance.



Preteens and Teenagers (ages 11+)

Preteens and teenagers are most concerned with working out their own identity and fitting in with their peers. Having established important identities and peer groups outside the family, a move threatens these. This may be the developmental stage that has the most difficulty with relocation.

Developmental milestones:

- Increased independence and responsibility.
- Establishing his/her own identity.
- Peers are primary affiliation.
- Value privacy.
- See themselves as adults.

What you may expect:

- Physical and/or verbal anger.
- Change in school performance/appearance/behavior.
- Mood swings/depression, including loss of interest in friends and activities.
- Look toward peers for comfort.
- Refusal to move and requests to live with friends.
- Unusual aggressiveness or unusual passivity.

What you can do:

- Respect their unique situation, validate their frustrations, and encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings.
- Let them be a part of the decision-making process.
- Have them contribute to the process of the move, including packing, travel plans, etc.
- Help them plan their goodbyes. Offer to let them have a going-away party or get-together.
- Remember, they may think they are adults, but they still need guidance and support.
- When talking with your teenager remember the following:
 - Choose your time wisely.
 - Be respectful.
 - Speak precisely and concisely.
 - Try to see their side.
 - Avoid blame. Don't use "you" statements.
 - Actively listen. Pay attention. Ask questions.
 - Be willing to compromise.

