

Helping Your Child Cope with Change

OUR CLASSROOMS ARE BUZZING with the energy of students anticipating the move to a new class or school. Children on the brink of change don't usually pull us aside and say, "I don't have a picture of what my life will be like when I go to kindergarten" or "enter a new class" or "graduate to middle school." Sometimes they will verbalize anxiety and/or excitement (since moving forward usually involves both feelings). Preschool children who will be attending our kindergarten have told me, "I don't know how my mom will find me" and "I don't know how I will find my friends." These fears often come out not in words but in non-compliance or increased emotion.

Those worries seem odd to adult ears since most preschoolers have walked by the kindergarten rooms and may even be able to see them from their classrooms. Yet children lack the ability to project themselves into the complexity of the new situation—what goes on inside the room, what is the teacher like, what are the expectations and rules, how will I go to the bathroom by myself? They depend on adults to be aware of that chasm in their awareness and how thinking about the future might be affecting them.

One of the helpful things we do at school is to give children sneak previews of new situations. During the year, Meher School graduates often return to spend a day in fifth grade when their middle schools are closed, and they are happy to orient their friends. We also take upcoming graduates on tours of Walnut Creek Intermediate and Stanley Middle School. Preschool teachers do the same for soon-to-be kindergartners. They take them on visits to the classroom and let them play in the new yard.

Here are some ways you can help your child cope with change and grow in self-confidence:

Avoid "over-talking" the change. Children learn to cope by staying in the here and now. If we keep reminding them "You're going to be in kindergarten soon!" it makes them nervous.

Be emotionally available. Simply understanding that your child might be overflowing with energy, and even regressing, can bolster them through the process of change. Spend special time together. Listen without dismissing their feelings.

Keep routines the same. When children are under stress, they need lots of sleep and predictability.

Create books and albums. Take pictures of their current teachers to create memories. Record what they say about your child. Write down your child's comments and the things she likes the most about her class.

Approach change with positivity. "I know you're a little nervous about graduating, but I think you're going to make lots of new friends at the new school."

Remember your changes when you were a child. Use your own experience as a guide. What did you need from adults?

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