

How to help children learn

- **Try to see things from their point of view.** Understanding how children see the world will help you to help them as they learn.
- **Let children be children.** A skilled five year old grows from a busy four year old, a curious three year old, a cuddled two year old, an adventurous one year old and a communicative baby.
- **Be a playful companion.** You can enjoy childhood with the children as well.
- **Feelings matter** – both the children's emotions and your own are part of any situation with young children. It is very helpful to be aware of your own moods as well as the children's when enjoying yourself with them and during difficult moments.
- **Don't expect to be perfect.** Everyone does something they don't mean sometimes. Children can be forgiving as long as we are thoughtful most of the time and are ready to say sorry when we should.



Helping children cope with change

Jennie Lindon

Early childhood seems like a time of constant change to adults. Just as you've got used to a predictable daytime nap, your child decides that she would rather play and chat than sleep. And just when you've worked out how to change her nappy while she's standing up (because she won't lie down), she insists that she must wear pants and use a potty. These are the everyday ways in which young children tell their parents and carers that they are moving on. They like to test their new abilities, sometimes demanding to 'do it myself!' All young children need to take these early steps towards independence, and adults generally enjoy the new development. But coping with sudden changes is not always easy for children or for their caring adults. After all ... while she may want to use the potty, is she really ready for it?

Are some changes more significant? Adults tend to focus on what seem like really significant transitions: perhaps moving a baby from breast or formula milk towards the family diet and the delight of a full night's sleep. It seems obvious that young children need to be eased into regular shared care arrangements or be prepared to join nursery class or pre-school. Many young children nowadays have some kind of group experience before entering primary school, but starting school can still feel like the 'big' one for children and parents.

Perhaps parents focus on major milestones in early childhood because they know what is coming. Young children don't have that knowledge. They deal with one day at a time and it can be smaller changes that confuse or trouble them. They learn to cope with change because caring adults have anticipated as much as they can and then are ready to look and listen for what really matters to this baby or that toddler.

It is vital to tune in to how young children are most likely to see any situation. Once they have the words to talk about something, they may speak up with, 'But why have I got to...?' or 'But you said that....!'

Sometimes they might let you know just as loudly through their actions that there has been a big change from what they see as 'normal'. What you might ignore as 'tantrums' may be the only way that young children can express frustration over changes that make no sense to them. It may be their way of asking for more help. For example, some young children seem to wonder why their parents have stopped the loud encouragement when they make it to the toilet. Adults perhaps feel that toilet training is now done, but two and three year olds often look puzzled – and a bit annoyed. They are still making the big effort, so what has happened to all the praise? You do not keep clapping into the teenage years, but children like it to die down slowly.

Why is it important to help?

Young children work hard to make sense of their social world. To feel emotionally safe, they need to be able to predict how the adults around them will behave and what tends to happen in daily life. When life is unpredictable, children have to use an awful lot of energy to work things out – What does she want me to do? Why is he cross with me? What's the big rush?

Change is inevitable in childhood, so children need to feel able to manage. Positive experiences of coping with small daily changes will help them to face the big transitions. Children also need to feel confident that it is ok to ask for help, that adults will care about them. Through

their experience of everyday changes, children learn whether they are somebody who can cope. Is change something that can be managed because adults let them know what will happen and listen to how they feel? Or is even minor change unpleasant and disruptive because adults give no warning, then get cross because children are upset and cranky?

Children can become able to handle big changes like moves to new places or new people when they are very young. But they need help to develop this ability. Of course, young children are all individuals – even when they are siblings. (Perhaps Alex likes advance notice, repeated three times, of any change in routine while his sister Sophie looks confused by the same warnings, as if to say, 'Why all the fuss? Let's just go!') The key to supporting any child through changes is to learn which of your actions tend to be most helpful to that individual.

How can you help?

- Take some time with what may seem like minor changes and your attention will have a major positive effect for children. For instance, babies, toddlers and young children like you to make it easier for them to move in comfort from being asleep to being fully awake and ready to enjoy the next part of the day. They like to see and hear you, and adjust to your presence rather than be scooped up without warning.
- Create a familiar routine and share the details with children. Routines can, of course, be a tyranny if they become more important than the people involved. But with good sense and flexibility, regular routines help children.

- Let children know simply 'what we will do today'. Children like to have friendly reminders such as, 'First we go to our drop-in and then we pick up Jamie from school'. Babies and toddlers hear your reassuring tone long before they understand the actual words.
- Give children a time warning so they do not feel rushed to stop playing in order to start tidying or come to the table for a meal. Young children do not understand how long five or ten minutes really lasts, so it is better to use a meaningful 'countdown' like 'you've just got time to finish your jigsaw' or 'would you like to help me now with our lunch?'
- Be consistent with routines at bedtime and during meals. As well as helping all the family through the day, these can help children deal with being away on holiday or staying with grandparents. You may realise that life will grind to a tearful halt without their special blanket, but a child's familiar drinking cup or favourite bedtime book can be just as important.
- Good nannies, childminders and nurseries take the time to talk with parents about these personal connections, so that young children can be eased into changes. Responsible nursery teams make parents welcome and are aware of parents' and children's feelings. You are right to be wary of early years practitioners who want to rush the settling-in process.

Children are still very young when they enter primary school and are often most anxious about taking care of themselves. They will feel more confident if you have spent time beforehand helping them to manage their clothing and shown them how to ask for help if they need it.

How do we tell if it is all too much?

Even the most carefree girl or boy will have limits. Try to avoid a patchwork of care that creates a day in which children have to deal with many places and lots of people with different ground rules. Children will let you know – by words and action – if the pattern of changes is a real struggle.

Most children will tell you quite clearly that 'this is all too much for me!' or 'I don't know what's happening!' – although they may not do it with words. You need to watch what they do as well as listen to what they say. Ask open-ended questions like, 'How was your weekend with Grandma?' and 'What do you think about your new playgroup?' Young children hear the message behind a closed question like, 'You're fine in nursery, aren't you?' and realise you do not really want to hear them say, 'No'. If children are given no choice but to struggle on, their unhappiness may come out in behaviour that is hard to handle. Young children can surprise you. They may be more flexible, even keener on a change than their parents. Perhaps you have been surprised by your child waving a cheery goodbye on his first day into playgroup. Well, perhaps you have done such a good job preparing him to be confident. Younger siblings, who have visited nursery to drop off an older child, may have been counting the days until they can stay in that lovely construction area with all the blocks.

Even so, it is worth keeping alert when children seem settled as they may have a delayed reaction to change. Younger siblings might be keen to join the nursery, but may still be tearful that you are not staying. Children may also believe, even with all your careful conversation and reading stories, that a change is only temporary. For example, young children may be sure that, 'soon we'll go back to our old home'. Some five year olds still think that after one day they have 'done big school'. In time, children learn that many changes are forever – and they will come to enjoy a great number of them.

Helping children cope with change

Useful publications

Helen Dorman & Clive Dorman (2002) *The social toddler*, Richmond: The Children's Project Ltd, www.childrenproject.co.uk.

Jennie Lindon (2006) *Care and caring matter: young children learning through care*, London: Early Education.

Jennie Lindon (2009) *Parents as partners*, London: Practical Pre-School Books

Jennie Lindon (2008) *What does it mean to be one (two, three, four, five)*, a set of five books, London: Practical Pre-School Books.

Lynne Murray & Liz Andrews (2000) *The social baby*, Richmond: The Children's Project Ltd.

Useful contacts

National Family and Parenting Institute: www.nfpi.org.uk

Parents: www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents

Parentline Plus: helpline on 0808 800 2222: www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Zero to Three is part of the Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families in the USA. It has good information for parents anywhere on its website: www.zerotothree.org

Jennie Lindon is a chartered psychologist, with over 30 years' experience of working with early years services for children and their families. She has written many books and magazine articles for parents and early years practitioners.

Early Education

The British Association for Early Childhood Education

Early Education

136 Cavell Street, London E1 2JA

tel 020 7539 5400

www.early-education.org.uk

British Association for Early Childhood Education (Early Education)

Learning together series

The Learning together series of leaflets aims to help parents and other caring adults understand children's development, play an active part in their learning and enjoy the children they spend time with. The leaflets cover a wide range of topics, including life with babies and toddlers, children's behaviour, being outdoors, drawing and writing, reading, maths, ICT and equality – and more. The leaflets can be downloaded from the Early Education website www.early-education.org.uk

Early Education promotes the right of all children to education of the highest quality. It provides support, advice and information on best practice for everyone concerned with the education and care of young children from birth to eight.

