

Teaching Children How to Adapt – by Cindy Jett

We try to create a world of structure and predictability for our children. We work hard to give them routines, a regular schedule and consistent expectations. We aim to make their lives predictable, stable, safe and secure. As they grow up, we hope that this early experience will be internalized as a kind of centeredness, and that they will be solid in a world of flux and change. In addition to providing children a safe and secure beginning, how can we prepare them for the ups and downs of life? One way may be to actively foster a positive attitude toward change.

A positive attitude does not require a Pollyanna naivete or the repression of feelings. Instead, it involves realistically assessing the positive and negative sides of an impending change. On the positive side, change is an opportunity to expand one's experience. It is life-enhancing, renewing, and essential to wellbeing. On the other hand, when change involves loss, it means actively grieving and processing feelings. And when a change presents obstacles, it means being proactive and confident that one can affect his fate for the better.

The following are some strategies that parents can use to foster such an attitude in children:

1. As much as we try to make our children's lives safe and predictable, they will experience changes from time to time, sometimes dramatic changes. As parents, we can use these experiences as an opportunity to actively teach our children how to be adaptable. The first step is to observe your child over a period of time. Notice how your child reacts to the prospect of change. Is there a pattern? Does he generally dig in his heels? Does he become anxious and fearful? Or does he look forward to new experiences? These patterns and attitudes can carry into adulthood. The goal is to change negative patterns and attitudes now before they become entrenched.
2. When your child is faced with a new situation or impending change, talk with him about his feelings. Sometimes this is easier said than done. Depending on the child's age, temperament and background, he may not be able to discuss his feelings directly. If a child has trouble articulating how he feels, approach it indirectly. Perhaps bring up a parallel example from your own life and discuss how you felt at the time. With younger children, it is helpful to use a picture book in which the main character goes through similar experiences.
3. Allow your child to grieve over losses change has brought in his life. Acknowledge the losses as real and comfort him in his sadness. If a child is not permitted to express his sadness, it can heighten his anxiety and possibly lead to depression.

4. Discover the picture in your child's head. A child's feelings about an impending change are directly correlated to his understanding of what is happening. If the child is telling himself that he will move to a new neighbourhood, and be shunned by the neighbourhood kids, it makes sense that he is feeling sad and fearful. Ask your child specifically what he thinks the future will hold once the change occurs.
5. Look for catastrophic thinking. Catastrophic thinking is black and white thinking, but with just the black. Look for the use of the words like "never," "always," "everyone," and "no one." Some examples might be "I'll never make any friends at my school," "Everyone already has friends," or "No one will want to be friends with me." These statements might feel like reality to the child but they are not. It is your job to challenge these statements and help your child develop a more balanced view of what the future may hold. If you repeatedly challenge catastrophic thinking, your child will pick up on the technique and begin to use it himself.
6. Prepare the child in case some of his fears are realized. For example, if nobody talks to the child in the new neighborhood suggest that he strike up a conversation up at the bus stop, or knock on a neighbor's door and introduce himself. Obviously, if the child is very shy or there are other obstacles, you should adjust your suggestions accordingly. Also, ask the child if he can think of solutions. Teaching a child to be proactive as a response to change will have immeasurable benefits over a lifetime. Proactive people feel more in control of their circumstances, and that is directly correlated with life satisfaction.
7. When appropriate, ask the child to try to envision a positive outcome. Encourage him to think of all the wonderful possibilities that a change might bring. This exercise teaches a child to think optimistically. Again, after enough repetition, the child may adopt this technique himself.
8. After a change has occurred and a child has adapted, call attention to his success. Remind him of his "picture in his head" and contrast it with the reality of the situation. This will help him be able to reality-test future thinking.