THE CATALYST

Tips for Helping Children Cope with Change

Navigating change and life transitions can bring fear, doubt, and anxiety. For young children, the addition of a new sibling or care person, entering daycare, school, or big changes such as parents divorcing or a move to a new place are a few that come to mind. As young adults, we leave home, begin new careers, start families, and enter and end relationships. As we age, we navigate new freedoms, such as retirement, and new challenges, such as declining health.

By: Lynne Harley | Posted: November 9, 2023

It has been said *that the one constant in life is change,* and the following quote by Arnold Bennett affirms that: “any change, even change for the better is always accompanied by discomfort.”

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These life journeys call us and our children to venture into the unknown. We all need tools to navigate and embrace change successfully, and we can empower our children to do the same.

Accepting emotions helps us deal with change

When we enter a new and unfamiliar situation, it can feel like our foundation is shaken. I’ve just finished reading the book “Learning to Love Yourself” written by Gay Hendricks. The subtitle, *A Guide to Becoming Centered*, really resonated with me. What I appreciate about this book is that the author shares his own childhood experiences and the ‘fallout’ he experienced from the messages he received to deny his feelings. Emotions can only be held at bay for so long, and they WILL find a way to express themselves. This can have serious consequences for our physical and mental health.

I, too, was raised in a family that didn’t acknowledge or express vulnerable feelings. My father drank excessively to manage his, and the rest of us worked hard to deny that anything was wrong in our home. If you had a similar childhood experience, you are not alone.

Looking back, I can see that my parents did the best they could, given the level of understanding they had at that time. As adults, we have a choice. We get to do it differently.

From Hendrick’s perspective as a psychologist, writer, and teacher in the field of personal growth, relationships, and body intelligence, he speaks of the importance of acknowledging, accepting, and feeling ALL of our feelings, the good, the bad and the ugly. This is how we grow in confidence and experience mental health.

It’s hard to experience uncomfortable feelings and to watch our own children struggle, especially if you didn’t have guidance on how to acknowledge feelings when you were young. Perhaps you heard one or many of these platitudes- meant to alleviate your anxiety: *Don’t worry; there is nothing to worry about; you’ll be fine; don’t be silly; calm down; there is nothing to be afraid of; stop thinking about it; It’s all in your head; don’t be a sissy.*

From where I am today and what I’ve learned and coached, I want to share some powerful tools that you can use to support not just your children but yourself in navigating changes. I personally use them in my own life and have shared them with clients who’ve learned to tame and reframe their fear to navigate some tough stuff and to move forward to create a new beginning.

Tools to help navigate change

A great way to begin is to tap into how you are feeling. The invitation is to do this with curiosity, kindness, and acceptance of whatever surfaces. We can teach our children to do the same.

Invite communication with your child by:

1. **Asking** how they are feeling about starting school, moving, mom or dad moving out, or any other changes. Create the opportunity for them to share their fears and excitement openly and honestly about the change.

- **Acknowledging** what they share. ”I hear you; this is new for you and can feel scary.”

- **Normalizing fear** and sharing times when you have felt afraid to start something new – perhaps a new job or going back to work or school yourself. Tell them that you now see fear as a signal. It shows up when we are growing, so it is really something to celebrate. It will be present when we are moving beyond what we know. A great mantra to share with them is: ***“Here I grow again.”***

- **Inviting** them to acknowledge what they may be afraid of or worried about. You can even write down some of their “what ifs” with them…

What if I don’t make any friends?

What if I don’t like school?

What if…. Again, you can insert what fear the change may generate.

For older kids, it might be:

What if I find out I don’t like this career path?

What if I don’t fit in? What if I’m homesick?

Most of our fears run a similar storyline. What if I fail? What if I am rejected?

In the programs I coach, we call this staring down the fear, calling it out.

Tap into your own feelings. Is there a place in your body where you feel your fear or worry? Ask your children the same question. A friend of mine shared that throughout her grade

two year, she had stomach aches almost daily. She ended up failing grade 2 and put even more pressure on herself to succeed. In university, she was diagnosed with Crohn's (an inflammatory bowel disease.) Our bodies have incredible wisdom and are always talking to us.

A powerful tool is breathwork. A long, slow breath in through the nose and a long exhale through pursed lips (as if breathing out of a straw) can shift our nervous system and help us to relax. When we calm down, 'we learn to stay' in the situation long enough to find our center again. **This is how we grow our capacity to navigate change.**

- Once you've acknowledged your fear, ask a new question of yourself. Do I want this to happen? If not, what would you love to have happen? If it is a change your child is facing, you might invite them to tell you and perhaps write down or draw pictures of what they would love toexperience in this new situation. Perhaps it's new friends, birthday parties, or learning new skills. Affirm that this can bring a growing sense of self-confidence. When fear does arise for you or them, when you or your child seems to be falling back into worry, remind yourself and them to take a few deep breaths and bring to mind what you or they want to experience as they navigate this new and unfamiliar situation.

I invite you to use these tips and tools the next time you or your child is feeling fearful or anxious. I believe it is so important to live what you want your children to learn. Ultimately, we are all our children's first and most important mentors.

How to recognize when you need more support for your child

All children have ups and downs, so how do you know if your child is struggling with something serious? Watch for some of the common signs:

- Excessive worrying and sadness
- Trouble sleeping
- Fatigue, headaches, or stomach aches
- Significant changes in eating, sleeping, and personal interests
- Withdrawing from family, friends, or activities they used to enjoy

Remember that asking for help is not a sign of weakness. It demonstrates self-awareness, courage, and strength. Seeking help for your child can make life healthier and happier for all of you.

Author: Lynne Harley

Currently resides in rural Saskatchewan, Canada. Her life work, spanning 40 years as a Social Worker and as a Transformational Life Coach, Author, and Speaker, has been to empower individuals to believe in themselves and to give credence to the still, small voice of truth that is within all of us. Her award-winning children's book "What If You Could?" was inspired by the work she does and shares a universal message, one that she envisions will be embraced by readers of all ages. Everyone, from children to adults, must navigate change. This book speaks to the power of listening deeply to our inner voice. Lynne is a passionate advocate for youth mental health. When Lynne is not writing and speaking, she loves spending time in nature, cycling, hiking, kayaking, travelling, and exploring the world. Learn more about Lynne at www.lynneharley.com

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