

Talking to Young Children about Change

Change can be difficult for anyone and it is sometimes frightening to children. Young children however, are particularly vulnerable and susceptible to change because they have had far fewer opportunities than adults or older children to develop the resilience that gives us the ability to adjust to the changes and effectively inculcate them into our lives. Resilience gives us the ability to build confidence and develop the tools that are needed to deal effectively with the losses often associated with change. Serious change may be a new experience for young children who not only lack the skills to manage the changes, but also lack the emotional wherewithal to understand and deal with their feelings. Some of the emotional or cognitive reactions that young children may display when the amount or intensity of change is great include:

- Changes in behavior
- Preoccupation or obsession with change or changing events
- Fear of separation
- Feelings of insecurity
- Grief regarding the losses
- Changes or disruptions in sleep patterns
- Changes or disruptions in eating patterns

Parents Be Aware, Good Decision Making is Key:

One of the difficulties in dealing with change is that parents themselves are also experiencing their own reactions to the changes while trying diligently to recognize and effectively deal with the signs of stress and anxiety in their children. So parents, in the midst of advocating and acting on behalf of their children, must also actively take care of themselves emotionally and mentally to ensure that the decisions they make for themselves and their children are the best decisions for the situation.

Focused, Productive Talking is Helpful:

Talking to others who can help the parent focus on the main issues and feelings they are concerned about that have resulted from the changes and need to be resolved is helpful. It produces a positive and appropriate outlet for the feelings and thoughts and helps direct the energy of the stress in more productive outlet. Merely venting or cathartically unloading on a family member or another parent who is in the same situation is not always helpful and can lead to more negative thoughts and feelings. Talking to a professional counselor is always a positive option that could be instrumental in not just working through personal feelings, but in also helping the parent effectively manage their child through their child's changes as well.

Children may not exhibit any overt symptoms at the time of the change because their reactions to the changes may be delayed. Do not assume that your child has not been affected because they do not immediately respond to the change as other children might and do not back away from discussing the situation with them for fear of making the problem more severe. Follow the lead of the child in bringing up the concerns or fears they may have by asking general questions regarding their knowledge of the changes and what they think about these changes. It is important that children understand that it is all right to speak to their parents about their concerns regarding change, even their fears (if they have them). It is not necessary for parents to go into great depth or make their children feel that they should have thoughts or feelings (that maybe don't exist) but it is important that parents open the door so that their children can open up in a safe listening environment if they choose to. A safe listening environment means the parents are not telling the child what they think or feel about the changes but rather helping and encouraging them to share what they are thinking and feeling.

What Parents Can Do For Their Children:

Parents should reassure their children that they will get through the changes and that they (the parent) will be there to help them with any parts that might be difficult. The parents need to provide comfort and stability for the child at this time (words are not always needed; it is the presence of the parent "I'm here" that speaks volumes when words seem inadequate. If the opportunity to talk arises, it is extremely helpful to discuss with them how, together, you will handle each change and give them a sense of hope and assurance for the future. The younger the child the more general those plans should be. They need your leadership and need to feel your confidence that you will be there for them and with them as they go through this change. With older children who need some answers you can be honest and say you don't know at this time but that there are solutions (or will be solutions) for the new circumstances that you will look for together. So without being dishonest or fake, keep your personal fears and insecurities away from the child. Do not make them feel the burden of your pain, disappointment or fears on top of what they are experiencing themselves. Let them know what will not change for example you could say "I'll be here for you to help you through this as I always have been" or "We have faced difficult changes before and we will be alright with this one" or "There is nothing we cannot figure out together", or "Our family will remain strong as we go through this together". Remind them of the things that they can depend on in their lives and feel secure about. Remain constant and be consistently available to them to answer their questions, clear up any misconceptions they may have about who's fault it is (children sometimes blame themselves for things they have no ownership of whatsoever), and be a continual source of strength and hope.

Hopelessness in the face of change can often lead to passivity. By taking action and controlling what you can, you reduce your sense of being a victim. Action breeds hope. This is also true for children. Help them to come up with positive ideas and ways to cope, handle or resolve some of the problems they may have with the changes that are taking place. This teaches them resilience and empowers them in terms of dealing with change in the future. Become a role model for

children by taking well-planned, positive actions yourself. Act on your values and beliefs and show your children how you are using them to manage the changes.

Some of the other practical tips that Penn Behavioral Health recommends for helping young children include:

- ◆ Touch and hold your children
- ◆ Take the time to talk slowly and calmly with them
- ◆ Be honest about why you are sad or upset, without dumping your feeling on them
- ◆ Use simple words
- ◆ Don't put ideas in their minds that would make them overreact (details)
- ◆ Don't overreact by making them feel that catastrophe is afoot (keep things as normal as possible)
- ◆ Don't under-react by assuming that they are too young to understand what is happening
- ◆ Talk about their thoughts and if they want about their feelings to
- ◆ Spend more time with them at bedtime
- ◆ Be patient with their behavior changes, yet firm with established boundaries and discipline
- ◆ If they seem afraid, create calmness and stability by consciously and demonstrably leading them through the changes
- ◆ If they seem sad (not depressed) or stressed (not anxiety ridden) this is normal for a short period of time – if it goes on for months get them some assistance from a professional.
- ◆ Talk to a professional, for yourself and/or your children

What You Can do for Your Family:

If you or a family member needs help dealing with these issues, give us a call at **(888) 321-4433**. Penn Behavioral Health's caring professionals can provide you with reassurance and practical assistance in a confidential and personal way. You can also reach us through our web site at www.pennbehavioralhealth.org.

As your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) we are here to assist you seven days a week, 24 hours a day.