

Some children find family separation (or other big family changes to living arrangements) pretty hard going for a while. They might feel sad, worried about the future, irritated, guilty or frustrated. Sometimes these feelings creep out into tricky behaviour, like becoming "clingy", crying, "acting out", getting more frustrated than normal, anxious behaviour or struggles at school.

However, other children manage separation and family changes really well. For some children, the new situation is actually a change for the better. For others, they do experience a "bump" with some short term struggles - but then move on quickly.

FORTUNATELY WE KNOW HOW TO MAKE POTENTIALLY SIGNIFICANT LIFE EVENTS LIKE THESE EASIER ON CHILDREN.

There are no formulas of course. Instead there are many different ways families manage well - depending on their situation and the needs of their own children. Here are some of the helpful steps I have seen families take to help children adjust:

- Many parents/carers support kids to have a positive relationship with both parents/carers.

*e.g. *When Jane and John separated, they worked really hard to avoid speaking ne.g.atively about each other in front of the children, made sure the kids had enough time and contact (phone calls, skype etc) with the other parent and not only didn't criticise each other - actually spoke positively about the other parent.*

- Many parents/carers work hard to provide children with consistency and predictability about who they are going to see and when, and what their routines and living arrangements will be.

e.g. Tom made a roster for his daughter about when she was seeing her maternal grandparents, (with whom she had been really close) and put it on the calendar so she could see in advance when she was going there.

- Many parents/carers continually reassure children that they are loved, the life changes are not their fault and that there will be happy times ahead.

e.g. 10 year old Joseph was worried his arguments meant his carers had split up. All of the people in his life wrote him a letter for him - about how much he was loved, and what they would do to make sure he had a good year - and he read this whenever he was worried

- Many parents/carers are careful to protect kids from "adult" or scary information about conflict, finances or new relationships.

e.g. Sally told her 9 yo son and 7 year old daughter "that's adult stuff" when they asked about money after she moved out of the family home. She said "we will organise it and sort it out" in a confident voice and changed the topic.

- Some parents/carers rearrange their life to spend extra time with them in order to allow questions and conversations to naturally occur.

e.g. After 11 yo Susan had moved from one carer home to another, her new carer organised for Susan to skip homework for a few weeks so she could have more time for games/park trips etc, so that Susan could talk about her worries if she wanted to.

- Many parents/carers know the importance of taking extra care of their social and sleep needs in times of changes

e.g. Theo and Erica talked together about making sure they were on the same page about bedtimes in the few months after their separation, and also re-arranged schedules so that their boys had playdates as needed during that time.

THERE ARE MANY OTHER WAYS PARENTS/CARERS CAN TAKE CARE OF CHILDREN'S WELL BEING IN TIMES OF FAMILY CHANGES.

Something else which I think is important is to make sure kids have the opportunity to tell us their worried and sad thoughts after big changes. This isn't always easy as children don't have the same communication skills as we do.

In my work with kids over the years I've developed a checklist about worries related to separation/family changes. It's a list of "worried/sad/frustrated thoughts about family changes some kids have" and is basically just a list of potential worries I've seen children experience in these times.

It's important to note that not all children have all - or even any - of these concerns. But some do - and it's usually more useful if they can express them to us. This checklist might be useful in helping that process, so I've copied it for you below.

Just copy and paste the questions below into a word document, fill in the names of carer 1/carer 2 - ie Mum/Dad if this is appropriate to your situation/what your child calls them) and ask your child to rate each "worried /sad thought" on a scale from 1-10, where 1 means - this is not something I worry about and 10 means I worry about this a lot.

Here are the potential worried/sad thoughts:

- I feel like I am a bit different from other kids now (?/10)
- I'm feeling worried about Carer 1 (e.g. Mum/Dad) or how he/she is going (?/10)
- I'm feeling worried about Carer 2 (e.g. Mum/Dad) or how he/she is going (?/10)
- I want to spend more time/live more of the time with (name of one carer) (?/10)
- I want to spend more time/live live more of the time with (name of another carer) (?/10)
- I'm Sad/worried about Christmas/birthday and other specials days (?/10)
- I think maybe I did something wrong to make this happen (?/10)
- (Name of one carer) will like/love me a bit less now (?/10)
- (Name of other carer) will like/love me a bit less now (?/10)
- I don't know what I can say to Carer 1 about Carer 2 or what happens at Carer 2's house (?/10)
- I don't know what I can say to Carer 2 about Carer 1 or what happens at Carer 1's house (?/10)
- Want to spend more time/live with **BOTH CARERS BOTH TOGETHER** (?/10)
- I'm angry at carer 1 because this is all his/her fault (?/10)
- I'm angry at carer 2 because this is all his/her fault (?/10)
- Something else I'm worried/sad/angry about is.....(?/10)

Calm Thoughts

Once you have a list of worried/sad thoughts which seem to be rated higher - then you can work together with the child to come up with some "calm thoughts" instead.

Of course, sometimes it feels like only one party in a separation/difficult life event is on board with supporting the kids. In those cases, don't doubt how important one committed parent/carer can be. Although of course ideally, all parties would work together - if at least one parent/carer is doing their best for their kids, this can sometimes be enough.

All the best in supporting your child through a tough life event. Remember to take care of yourself as well - if we can look after our own needs, we are much better at being there for children.