

## Moving house

### Strategies and stories to support young children

*Moving house is likely to be a stressful time for everyone so it is good to prepare for it consciously. Children need extra support in a move. Depending on where and how far the move is, and what else it involves, stress levels on the children can accumulate to be high enough to create behaviour and health changes. A number of big changes together like a change of house, of familiar city, of friends, of school, in the usual supports for parents, and in jobs for the father or mother, is sufficient for children to experience a serious change in health and/or behaviour. This article contains some suggestions of what might help ease the way.*

#### Caring for yourselves

**Adults:** Try to keep your own stress levels down, but acknowledge that there will be a lot of stressors on both of you: big decisions, insecurities, lack of support in the near future, physically tiring packing etc. Support yourself in every way you can: good food, enough sleep, breaks where you can relax and regather yourself, however short. Try to stay calm and do not forget to breathe deeply.

**Children:** Children need to feel the safety of predictability and routines within the move,

before and after. Keep the routines strong and still beautiful. Try to keep to having meals together and bedtimes regular, even if the house is in turmoil. In the packing, make sure the things important to them are still available—pillows, bedding, special toys, a few books for stories.

Acknowledge their feelings, their excitement, their sadness and their fears and also help them to see the positive side of all their concerns. One way to do this is through stories about them and the move.

#### Create an ongoing therapeutic story

A therapeutic story for the children can create an imaginative pathway into this new family adventure, and give them time to prepare inwardly for what is going to happen. Children need this time.

The story can be repeated as often as they need it. Start and end with the same form each time, and let it grow according to their questions and needs. Here is an example:

## A story for James and Jeremy

Once upon a time there were two small blonde boys. One was called James and he was five years old. The other was called Jeremy and he was three years old. They lived with their Daddy and their Mummy and a cat and a rabbit and the birds in the garden. They lived happily in a little white house in a green yard with roses that bloomed and smelt sweet.

One day their Daddy came home with very exciting news. "Hey, keep your hats on! We are going on an adventure!" The little boys came running and sat on his lap and said, "Tell us! Tell us, Daddy!" And he did...

He told them that they were going to move to a new house, in another town, where the tall mountains meet the sea and they were going to have all sorts of adventures together. They would have a new garden where they could play different sorts of games and a new kitchen where they could make some biscuits for when their friends came to visit (and maybe they could eat some themselves). They would have their own beds and pictures, and their pets and all their toys would come along to be part of the adventure together.

Mummy was pleased too because... they would be able to see Uncle Robert and Auntie Natalie more often and ... Sometimes the boys and their Mummy and Daddy would visit Uncle, Auntie and the little cousins and sit out in their garden under the big tree and drink juice. Sometimes Aunt and Uncle and the cousins would come to visit their family in their new house and the boys would help to make pancakes for a surprise... Or they would all meet in the market on Saturday morning after the shopping... Daddy was pleased because he would be working again and they would all have the money to go to the zoo...

And Grandma and Grandpa would come to visit them and the boys would make a welcome cake to have for their tea, and make a bed for them to sleep in....

The boys would make a 'goodbye and thank you' card with Mummy's help to give their old friends next door and they could tell them all about their coming adventures and invite their friends to come to visit them...

In their new home they would all make new friends and find new things to do...

Sometimes they might feel sad that they were leaving their friends, but adventures were like that. They needed courage. When they made new friends they would have old friends and new friends and have so many candles to light for their friends at special times that they would nearly run out of candles! They would have a board on the wall with all their friend's pictures on it so they could send their love to them whenever they liked. They could make a rainbow from their own hearts to those they loved and send their love along its beautiful colours. They could even send their love with the birds in the garden because, as we know, little birds always have cousins in other places to help deliver the messages for us. And of course all their loving angels would go right along, wherever they were, and enjoy the adventure as well...

Sometimes they would still all go up to the lake on holiday together like they always did and they would swim and go out in the boat... And at Christmas they would all get together again....

...And after Daddy had told them the next part of their adventure the two small boys would go off to bed and tell their toys all about it and sleep very well indeed.

Make the story fit with what the children know already and also work towards possibilities. Add more to your story about what you might do in the new house or town from your own experiences there before. Use descriptions, for example of watching the ferry go out, or the highways between the hills, or seeing new birds. Do not assume saying goodbye is not important to your children, even if they are young, especially if you are moving a long way away. To whom and to what do the children need to say goodbye? Friends, school, places? Give them an opportunity to do this. Perhaps you could take with you special invitations you have made together, for people to come to visit you in the new house. "Good-bye, good-day, we'll come back another day!" – children always love a good chant. Or sing a goodbye song. Talk about your coming back to visit your old home again if that is going to be possible. If children are showing

or people. As the details become clearer add more, perhaps another chapter. Use the story to give reassurance on things the children may be showing concern about and always end with the same reassuring ending. Acknowledge the move by the saying of goodbyes.

distress at leaving the old house, you may be able to redirect their thoughts by saying goodbye to the house with a little ceremony where you thank the house for what it has given you, etc.

Always build the picture of how lucky they are to have all these people who love them wherever they are, just like their other Grandma or family friend loves them though she or he lives a long way away. They can take places and people 'into their heart' where they can keep them always. A photo album of special people and places might help too!

## Watching for fears and misunderstandings

Children can get things really confused and you need to be mindful of fear-based behaviours arising so that you can correct any mistaken ideas they have and reassure them that all will be well. Children make sense of the world in the best way they can but do not have much experience to help them. What can be really obvious to the adult may not occur to the child at all so it helps to talk through the details. For example, whether they will be taking their own beds or bedding! Listen

carefully to what they say for clues of what may be making them anxious. The children will be more concerned about what will happen to all those things strongly 'ensouled' by them (favourite toys, pets, dolls etc.) which become an extended part of themselves. These things should be taken with you if possible. If not, it should be made clear that they will be well taken care of by someone else.

## Moving day

Prepare them for what will happen on the actual moving day and add it to your story. *"Once upon a time... At last moving day arrived. The boys got up in the morning and washed their faces...and that night they slept in their own little beds with all their toys in their new room and slept very well indeed."*

On the day, try to keep to routines if you can, especially around bedtimes. Make setting up new beds, with bedding and toys they know, a priority after good food. Give them time for a story and a last reassuring talk. Let them know and hear that you are still close by.

## *Settling in*

Keep the routines, the reassurance and the stories going. Prepare them for new events with more stories. For example, add to your story about each child's first day at the new school or kindergarten.

## *And finally...*

Remember to look after yourselves very well, with good food, good sleep, good loving. Good journeying.

Here is a blessing for your journey...

*May the road rise to meet you.*

*May the wind be ever at your back.*

*May the sunshine warm upon your face*

*And the rain fall soft upon your fields*

*And until we meet again*

*May God hold you ever in the palm of His hand.*

*An Irish blessing*