



# NEW JERSEY PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

## Ready for Change? Prepare Your Family to Face Transitions Gracefully

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Although we are all asked to make many smaller transitions each day and over our lifetimes, major transitions (new sibling, divorce, child leaving for college, school or job changes) can strain your family's ability to cope.

Fortunately, there are specific things you can do to be prepared.

### CREATING A FOUNDATION

Healthy lifestyle choices that you make every day can help you face transitions both big and small with flexibility and a positive attitude. The following three changes can make a big difference:

#### 1. Pay attention to basic needs for food and enough sleep

Children who are hungry are grumpy and have difficulty controlling their behavior. Sleep deprivation interferes with their ability to learn and to be cooperative. Adults, too, have mood swings, make poor decisions, and have difficulty parenting in a calm and patient way, when not eating and sleeping properly.

**Dinner time** and **going to bed** are the most difficult daily transitions that parents and children make, but there are ways to make them easier—and maybe even pleasant!

Tips for feeding your family:

- **Have breakfast—so you have the energy to face the challenges of work and school.**
- **Sustain everyone's energy and positive mood—always bring along healthy snacks!**
- **Plan meals ahead of time. Don't wait until everyone is hungry to decide what to eat--bad mood and bad decisions will result!**

Tips for helping you and your children drift off to sleep easily and wake up well-rested:

- **Maintain a consistent time for going to bed and waking up (including weekends) and follow the same routine every night (a fixed wake up time “sets” your body's clock so it knows when to sleep)**
- **Ensure that your child is not drinking caffeine (check labels), and limit your intake**
- **No televisions in children's bedrooms (read, sing, or talk before sleep), or in yours !**

#### 2. Make time for relaxation each day

Try these exercises with your children:

- a. Lie down with a small toy (or their hand) on the belly; child watches the toy float up and down as s/he breathes in and out through the nose
- b. “Square breathing”: inhale to count of 4; hold for count of 4; exhale for count of 4; pause for count of 4, before taking next breath (reduce 4's to 3's, if too long)

- c. Start with face, moving to neck, shoulders, arms, hands and fingers, tummy, thighs, calves, feet and toes: tense the muscles in one group, take in breath and hold, release muscles and breath at same time, and say “relax and let go;” move on to next group

For you:

**Relaxation/Healing Breath** (stimulates the “relaxation response”) (twice daily, starting with 4 cycles and, after two weeks, increasing to 8 cycles and staying with 8 cycles thereafter; Andrew Weil, M.D. recommends it as treatment for a variety of illnesses, and says, “the benefits are gradual and cumulative, leading eventually to better health of the whole nervous system.”)

- a. place tongue so that the tip is resting on the ridge behind your top front teeth (keep it there)
- b. exhale completely through your mouth, making a blowing sound
- c. close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose, counting silently to 4
- d. hold your breath for the count of 7
- e. exhale (blowing sound) through your mouth to the count of 8

### **3. Take time out to play, laugh, and connect with each other—find a balance between work and play**

#### **FACING THE CHANGE OR TRANSITION**

##### **➤ Are you ready for the challenge?**

Think about how you generally approach changes and transitions. Consider new, more effective strategies, if necessary. The following ideas may be helpful.

- 1. Make lifestyle changes that provide a foundation and can support you through transitions (sleep, rest, relaxation, nutrition, exercise, work-play balance)**
- 2. Find your calm center while changes occur around you; focus on the present moment and breathe!**
- 3. Ask for support and advice from others (and trust your own judgment); seek information and help**

##### **➤ Helping your children be ready**

Small and larger changes or transitions in life can be looked at as opportunities for learning. Children can learn to:

- feel safe in new environments
- trust the new people in their life
- discover that new places and routines can be fun and exciting
- feel competent in making the change successfully
- enjoy problem-solving
- become more flexible and resilient

#### **What to do:**

- Discuss changes as early as possible; focus on being “ready” for starting something new
- Help your child think of it as a “milestone”—a new undertaking—a reason to celebrate
- Address feelings
  - Encourage your child to talk about his/her feelings
  - Point out the feelings of both looking forward to the new people and things to do and learn, and the fears that are natural to facing anything that is new or unknown

- Elicit your child’s questions—provide answers, if possible; or say you’ll/we’ll find out
- Help your child find out what the new situation will be like:
  - Visit the new school and teacher
  - Read books about having a new baby in the house
  - Talk to others who have gone through their parents separating
- When your child expresses fear
  - Validate it—it’s natural to feel fear of the unknown
  - Then,
    - Work together to find a way to cope with it (e.g. what will I/we do if?)
    - Talk about the routine of the day or event or new plan

➤ **Plan ahead**

Think about what is needed for the change ahead and share these plans with your child

➤ **Discuss any changes in routine that will result**

- Keep things the same as much as possible, especially eating and sleeping routines
- Let children know of any differences in schedules that will result

➤ **Get organized**

- Make lists, obtain supplies (e.g., for school; for living in two different houses)
- Make a large calendar (use this also for marking when the change will happen)
- Involve children in coming up with ideas for addressing changes and implementing them

**WEATHERING THE TRANSITION:** “So, how’s it going?”

- **Talk** with your children often to see how they are coping with the change—be prepared to LISTEN carefully for their thoughts AND feelings
- **Offer support and validation** (“it seems like you are feeling a little sad;” “I can tell that you are excited for school each day—does that mean you are feeling more comfortable and having fun?” “You seem to be getting used to the idea of your parents living in two different houses, but it seems like you still feel a little confused and angry at times. Is that right?” “I notice that you are having fun holding the baby and helping me with getting diapers, and also that it is sometimes hard to hear all the crying and getting woken up at night”)
- **Brainstorm with your child** ideas for coping with difficulties (“What could we do to help you make new friends at school?” “How can Daddy and I help you get ready for changing from one house to the other on weekends?” “Let’s figure out a new bedtime routine”)

Even with your best efforts to cope with change, there may be times that you feel that you and your family could use help with getting through a difficult time. Psychologists specialize in helping people gain a new perspective on the issues they are facing and to discover what is keeping them from moving forward. Together, you can figure out effective ways to manage the challenges you are facing.

To find a psychologist: talk with your physician or your child’s pediatrician, or see [www.psychologynj.org](http://www.psychologynj.org)

For further information regarding life transitions, stress management, and emotional wellness, see [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)