

Change and Resilience at the Beginning of a New School Year – Opportunities for Growth

Over the past week you and your children have experienced some change with the start of the new school year. For some, the change has been radical. For Kinder students it is a whole new beginning, for Preps they are now getting used to full time school, for a few it has been a change of school resulting in a new set of relationships and a new place to be and perhaps for others the change is simply a move to a teacher/s they already know and perhaps a new classroom. Transitions can be exciting and enjoyable, and they can also be quite stressful. Some students will have found it exciting and some scary and just about everyone will have found degrees of both excitement and fear. Our capacity to cope with change is one component of mental health. This capacity is shaped by our own unique combination of nature, nurture and prior events. Any new situation involves the loss of the old, known one. The more unstructured, strange or unexpected the new situation is, the more disorientated and unable to cope we are likely to feel. We trust that your child's beginning to the new school year has been structured, expected, not too strange and not disorienting. How well any one person deals with new situations depends in part upon their experiences and resilience levels.

Working through a transition from the old to the new can lead to increased confidence and experience. Experience and learning gives people more skills to manage their lives. Working through change which sometimes seems difficult at the time helps to build the idea that one is capable, and then more able to cope with something similar in the future. As you watch your child moving from one phase of their lives to another, sometimes it can help to remember and remind them about previous experiences by asking, "How did you manage at that time and how did things turn out? When and how did the previous 'change' just become a normal part of life?"

It can also help to acknowledge there are a wide variety of feelings that accompany change and to accept these feelings and understand that you may act and feel differently for a while. It is normal to have these feelings and as the unfamiliar becomes the 'new normal' you will find they become less intense and gradually pass. It's a time when emotion coaching your child will be something that may be helpful. That is, identify how your child is feeling and find the words to label those feelings for them. Remember, don't ask your child how they are feeling, state to them how they are feeling or if you would prefer to be less direct and preface the statements with "It seems as if you are feeling nervous / scared / anxious / worried" or "If I were you I would be feeling too" or "I am thinking that you are feeling" or "I can only imagine that you are feeling" If you have not pitched the feeling accurately, your child will most probably correct you!

Some useful ideas to help cope with change might be writing in a journal or diary, talking to someone about the feelings, being creative, getting involved with others with similar interests, staying in touch with old friends, positive self-talk, setting goals.

Have you ever wondered why one child copes with change and another struggles?

Some kids are resilient by nature. Their temperament helps them to be mentally and psychologically tough – they get straight back up after a setback or disappointment. The good news is that most of the research shows that resilience can be nurtured and developed, particularly when parents are resilient and they foster it in their children. Coaching your child through challenging times and reflecting on what they have learned for next time sets them up to cope with adverse or difficult situations in the future.

You can promote a lasting sense of resilience in your child/ren by:

- Having a positive attitude yourself
- Looking for and honing in on teachable moments by making problems into opportunities for learning and growth
- Making kids active participants in the family; perhaps using family meetings to discuss dynamics, roles in the family, decisions to be made, giving all family members an opportunity to express opinions etc
- Building kids coping skills – help them to change any negative thoughts and self-talk to positive thoughts and self-talk – Melbourne Clinical Psychologist, Andrew Fuller calls it “dolphin or shark thinking”. Give them examples of how you do this
- Helping your child to understand that change is constant, a part of life and a time to look for opportunities

Gai Bath and Andrea Maver

gbath@smc.tas.edu.au

amaver@smc.tas.edu.au

SMC Counsellors