

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 14

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CHILDREN AND FAMILY MOVES

Moving to a new community may be one of the most stress-producing experiences a family faces. Frequent moves or even a single move can be especially hard on children and adolescents. Studies show children who move frequently are more likely to have problems at school. Moves are even more difficult if accompanied by other significant changes in the child's life, such as a death, divorce, loss of family income, or a need to change schools.

Moves interrupt friendships. To a new child at school, it may at first seem that everyone else has a best friend or is securely involved with a group of peers. The child must get used to a different schedule and curriculum, and may be ahead in certain subjects and behind in others. This situation may make the child stressed, anxious or bored.

Children in kindergarten or first grade may be particularly vulnerable to a family move because developmentally they are just in the process of separating from their parents and adjusting to new authority figures and social relationships. The relocation can interfere with that normal process of separation by causing them to return to a more dependent relationship with their parents.

In general, the older the child, the more difficulty he or she will have with the move because of the increasing importance of the peer group. Pre-teens and teenagers may repeatedly protest the move, or ask to stay in their hometown with a friend's family. Some youngsters may not talk about their distress, so parents should be aware of the warning signs of depression, including changes in appetite, social withdrawal, a drop in grades, irritability, sleep disturbances or other dramatic changes in behavior or mood.

Children who seem depressed by a move may be reacting more to the stress they are experiencing than to the relocation. Sometimes one parent may be against the move, and children will sense and react to this parental discord.

If the child shows persistent signs of depression or distress, parents can ask their family doctor, their pediatrician, or the local medical society to refer them to a child and adolescent psychiatrist. The child and adolescent psychiatrist can evaluate and treat the child's emotional problems which may be associated with stress and also help parents make the transition and new experience easier for the whole family.

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To make the move easier on children, parents may take these steps:

- Explain clearly to the children why the move is necessary.
- Familiarize the children as much as possible with the new area with maps, photographs or the daily newspaper.
- Describe advantages of the new location that the child might appreciate such as a lake, mountain or an amusement park.
- After the move, get involved with the children in activities of the local church or synagogue, PTA, scouts, YMCA, etc.
- If a son or daughter is a senior in high school, consider the possibility of letting him or her stay with a trusted family until the school year is over.
- Let children participate in designing or furnishing their room.
- Help children keep in touch with friends from the previous neighborhood through telephone, letters, e-mail, and personal visits.

The more frequently a family moves, the more important is the need for internal stability. With the proper attention from parents, and professional help if necessary, moving can be a positive growth experience for children, leading to increased self-confidence and interpersonal skills.

For additional information see *Facts for Families*:

#4 The Depressed Child,

#7 Children Who Won't Go to School,

#8 Children and Grief, and

#47 The Anxious Child.

See also: *Your Child* (1998 Harper Collins)/*Your Adolescent* (1999 Harper Collins).

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