



Helping Children Adjust to New Caregivers

Whether your child is experiencing child care for the first time or receiving temporary care or backup care, a successful transition involves careful preparation—beginning with your choice of caregivers. Once you have carefully investigated your child care options and selected a provider you are comfortable with, you face the often difficult task of helping your child assimilate to the new caregiving arrangement. This guide provides helpful tips and information for easing the transition.

When her child care center closed, Sarah had to enroll her son in a new facility. "It took Timmy a long time to feel comfortable with the teachers and children at his first center," states Sarah. "Now he will have to make this adjustment all over again and I want to make the transition as smooth as possible for him."

Preparing Children for Their First Experience With Child Care

Naturally, young children get very attached to their parents. This attachment can be particularly strong if a child is used to being cared for exclusively by a stay-at-home parent. Very often, separation anxiety occurs when children are cared for by someone other than their parents, especially if care occurs outside their home. Here are some tips for helping your child prepare for child care for the first time:

- ◆ Prepare your child in advance. Practice saying good-bye by leaving your child with a familiar family member, neighbor, baby sitter or friend. Leave your child with these other caregivers for brief periods of time, gradually lengthening the time spent apart.
- ◆ If your baby is breastfeeding, use a bottle occasionally and let a friend feed your child. Let others change your child's diapers.
- ◆ Gradually introduce your child to outside noises during nap time (e.g., leave a window open or the television or radio on).
- ◆ Talk with your child about the new caregivers he or she will have. Show enthusiasm for the care arrangement with your words and your tone of voice.
- ◆ Help build your child's feelings of security and well-being by talking about what activities and events may happen during the day, including when your child will eat, sleep, play, etc.
- ◆ Reassure your child that the caregiver will keep him or her safe.
- ◆ Before care begins, introduce your child to the caregiver. Observe their interaction carefully—a good caregiver will try to make your child feel loved and welcome in the new care situation.
- ◆ If you have an in-home caregiver, have the new provider perform a task that you are usually in charge of, like preparing your child's snack or changing a diaper. This may help your child warm up to a new caregiver.
- ◆ If your child will be attending a child care facility, visit the center in advance to introduce your child to caregivers and other children. If friendships can be made ahead of time, your child won't feel alone when care begins.
- ◆ Talk with your child about what you will be doing at work. Show your child where you work, driving there from home or the child care facility, to help him or her understand where you are during the day.

- ♦ Read books with your child about how making new friends can be fun.
- ♦ Ask your child to explain how he or she feels about the new arrangements and empathize with those feelings.
- ♦ If your child is old enough, role-play the upcoming event at home. Pretend that you are the caregiver and have your child be a parent, using a favorite doll or stuffed animal as the “child.” Tell your child that he or she needs to comfort the child and assure it that everything is okay. This exercise may help your child recognize and apply those reassurances to him or herself when the real situation occurs.
- ♦ On the first day of care, ask your child to help you pack a lunch, choose his or her outfit, and/or pack a favorite toy or pacifier. In addition, give him or her a picture of your family to look at during the day.
- ♦ As you walk or ride together on that first day, talk or sing. Casually discuss what you will do when you are together again.
- ♦ Regularly talk with your child’s caregiver(s) to make sure your child is adjusting well, making friends, and getting involved in daily activities. Most caregivers will automatically provide parents with a report, at least during the first few weeks of care.

Note—Please refer to the section, “Everyday Tips for Easing the Transition Between Home and Child Care,” for more information on helping your child adjust to child care.

Helping Children Adjust to Changes in Child Care Arrangements

Depending on the child, a change in child care arrangements may be a difficult transition, or a rather insignificant one. Think back to when your child first went to child care. Did he or she have trouble being apart from you? Your answer may give you a good feel for how your child may react when introduced to a different caregiver. However, even if your child had little trouble adjusting to child care in the past, don’t take caregiver changes lightly. No doubt, your child has formed new attachments with his or her caregivers, the care facility and other children. A change in daily routine without the support of familiar people and places can be distressing to your child.

Tip—Young children recognize and thrive on routine. If you will be late, call your child’s caregiver to alert him or her. If your child is in a center, he or she will know when to expect you based upon when other parents come. If this pattern is disrupted, your child may feel concerned.

- ♦ Have your child meet any new caregivers at least once before care begins, as well as other children who may be in the same care arrangement.
- ♦ Spend a little extra time with your child at the new care facility and explore the new surroundings together. You may want to gradually shorten your stay until he or she is comfortable.
- ♦ Keep your child’s daily routine as unchanged as possible; children thrive on routine. The only thing different is where care is being provided and/or who is providing it.
- ♦ Talk with your child about the new care arrangements and explain why things are changing. Encourage your child to express his or her feelings about the situation and empathize with those feelings.
- ♦ Express your confidence in the new caregiver’s abilities and in your child’s ability to adjust to this change.
- ♦ Show enthusiasm for the new care arrangement with your words and your tone of voice. Teach your child that change offers fun and exciting opportunities.
- ♦ Have your child bring a memento from the old care setting to the new one (a drawing, arts and crafts project, photo of the former caregiver, etc.).

Everyday Tips for Easing the Transition Between Home and Child Care

Even after your child becomes used to a child care arrangement, the transition from home to care, even in-home care, can cause minor disturbances on a day-to-day basis. It is important that you help your child ease in and out of a care situation each day, especially during the toddler years. As children get older and attend school, they are better able to handle these types of transitions on their own.

Daily Transition Techniques

- ◆ Make sure caregivers greet your child warmly and cheerfully upon arrival. Take the time to be sure your child gets settled comfortably. This is no time to rush.
- ◆ Establish an arrival routine: sign in together, stow belongings, do a short activity together, wave good-bye from a special place. Observe rather than play with your child so that he or she is more likely to be drawn to the activities of the caregiver or other children.
- ◆ Be sure to touch base with your child's caregiver about your child's activities, moods and behavior. By communicating, both you and your caregiver will be better able to respond to your child.
- ◆ Have your child bring a favorite toy or other personal item to child care (a family picture, favorite stuffed animal, etc.). The more home-like you can make the care setting, the easier and more enjoyable it will be for your child to go there.
- ◆ If you have in-home care, have the caregiver arrive a short while before you leave for work. Share morning activities with the caregiver, such as preparing breakfast or helping your child dress so your child is accustomed to the caregiver's presence by the time you leave.
- ◆ Do not leave your child with a caregiver without saying good-bye—if you do this, you risk violating your child's trust.
- ◆ Tell your child when you will be back and link the time to an activity your child will know: for example, "I'll be back after your afternoon snack."
- ◆ Always say good-bye with a kiss, hug and a wave. Be firm but friendly about leaving; a prolonged good-bye will only make it harder for both of you.
- ◆ Comforting words such as, "I know it's hard to say good-bye," are helpful. Ridicule such as, "Only babies cry," will not help your child learn to deal with difficult situations. Treat your child with firmness tempered by love and patience.
- ◆ Good-byes will be less painful for your child after you have left. Communicate regularly with your child's caregiver and you will probably find that it becomes easier for your child as each day passes.
- ◆ Maintain a predictable schedule. Children need to be confident that they can count on you to come back when you say you will.
- ◆ When you return at the end of a long day, you and your child may each be running low on energy and patience. Make a conscious effort to put aside the problems of the day and concentrate on the needs of your child.
- ◆ Let your child tell you about the day's activities or show you something he or she has accomplished. Talk with your child's caregiver about the day's activities and your child's behavior, moods, eating and sleeping habits, etc.
- ◆ For some children, leaving a care setting at the end of the day can be difficult. You will want to be just as firm, in a friendly way, about going home as you were about leaving your child in the morning. Setting an end-of-the-day ritual where your child retrieves his or her lunch box, puts away any materials, and says good-bye to friends and caregivers may help you get on your way. Additional parameters like, "We will leave when the clock says five minutes are up," may also help.
- ◆ Use commuting time to ease the transition from home to child care and back again. Commuting can be a special time to share accomplishments and ideas, play games or observe changes in your surroundings.
Note—You may want to bring a snack that your child can nibble on during the ride.

For more information on related topics, please consult the other publications in the *Backup Care Connection*SM library.

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