

MARIJANA'S TIPS FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH TRANSITIONS AND CHANGE

Change and transitions are inevitable part of life. That doesn't mean that they are easy - some of us find them very hard. This is because our nervous system interprets change and transition as stress, and it doesn't like it.

Our brains like stability and structure - transition and change interfere with that. It takes a lot of brain power and strength to thrive during these unsettling periods - that is why so many children struggle with it. Their brains are simply still not mature enough to be able to cope with it independently and consistently.

However, change and transitions can also be good for us. For children, it allows them to develop strategies to be able to control their behaviour and emotions. So, instead of avoiding change and (over)protecting children during transitions, we need to teach them the skills to learn how to change gears without stalling.

To help you support your children through periods of change and transitions, consider consistently following these tips:

Teach children about their brains: often change and transitions can cause children to feel dysregulated, angry, sad, worried, and overwhelmed. Helping children understand what happens to their brains can be empowering in these situations.

Tell your child that their brain is like a house with upstairs and downstairs. Different characters live in these 2 levels: upstairs people are problem solvers, planners, emotion regulators, thinkers, while downstairs people are the feelers and worriers focusing on feeling safe. Worriers look out for danger, sound alarms, and make sure that we are ready to protect ourselves. They see transition and change as threatening situations and will try their best to protect us. This is why we tend to feel scared, worried, angry or overwhelmed and we react by lashing out, crying, clinging onto parents, struggling to sleep... The trick is to first notice when the worriers start to whisper things into our ears telling us that we are in danger. We then need to ask one of the upstairs people to talk to the worriers and say: "Thank you for trying to keep me safe but I don't need your help right now".





Find their preferred calm-down technique and practice it often: some children like deep breathing to calm themselves. Some prefer to have strong sensory inputs to calm their downstairs brain, some need to move their bodies, some respond better to sounds and smells. Dedicating some time to explore what works for your child when they are faced with change and transition is a good idea.

You can experiment with massaging their hands, tickling them, giving them a back rub, bouncing on a trampoline, doing some simple yoga moves, blowing bubbles, listening to music...

Once you find your child's preferred calm-down technique, practice it when they are calm as then their brain is more likely to respond to it when triggered.

Allow feelings to come out: most children feel overwhelmed when faced with change and transitions. If we deny those feelings and tell them that "there is nothing to worry about", they get a message that we don't understand them and that they shouldn't be having such thoughts. So, notice when your child changes their behaviour in response to transitions, listen to them without judgement, communicate that you understand their experience, ask them what they need to do to feel better. Then gently guide them through their preferred calming down technique, remind them of the worriers in their brain and how they need to address them.



Plan and practice: you wouldn't let your child take a test unprepared, but we often let them walk into situations without any preparation, expecting them just to be able to cope. To prepare your child for change and transition:

- Talk to them about what will happen but don't make the "waiting period" too long – for some children the anticipation can be even more triggering.
- Explore their feelings about the upcoming situation.
- Ask: "How can we make it easier?" Agree on a solution or a tactic.
- Practice using role-plays, their teddies, dollies or other toys.

Finally, accept that most children regress during periods of change and transition. They need us to maintain boundaries and structure as that makes them feel safe. They need us to be patient, emotionally available and to co-regulate. But above all, they need us to control our own worriers and model the above skills.