

# STAYING CALM WHEN YOUR KIDS ARE STRESSED OUT

## Staying Calm when your Kids are stressed out!

This booklet outlines the sort of things that children worry about (and the things that affect their mental health) and illustrates what role parents might play in supporting them through the inevitable difficulties that will come their way as they grow up.

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## 1. Introduction

As parents we like to protect our children from harm and feel it's our responsibility to prevent them from being upset, worried or anxious.

It is inevitable that they will have to go through experiences at home and in school, where they will be very worried and upset, but many of these life-events are necessary growing-up life-experiences, which will help to make them into the adults they become.

Much of the advice to parents is focussed on "what not to do" and just goes on to make us feel more inadequate or persecuted.

In contrast, this booklet is designed to help you "be there and support your child" though these difficult times, and tries to answer the typical questions I have been asked over the years in supporting parents and children.

## 2. What are life events?

We all have to experience and cope with events in our lives which cause us stress and are often very upsetting. These include life events, such as moving house, the death of people close to us and starting or leaving a new job. All these changes produces some discomfort and stress to us, but those changes which are imposed upon us and over which we have no control, are the ones which have the greatest effect upon us.

What happens is that we get worried, lose sleep, have bad dreams, and get very upset, they make us feel ill, but eventually we come to terms with the change and these unpleasant reactions go away as we move on.

## 3. How do children show us that they are worried?

You know your child better than anyone, so you'll be able to see when they are worried by the changes in their behaviour or their attitudes. Many of these are behaviours which are a constant problem for some children, but I am suggesting you notice changes in your child from their "normal self."

These are the ways in which children can react when they are worried or anxious about something:

- They may have problems sleeping (getting to sleep, waking up or having bad dreams)
- They may become fearful, clingy and anxious and not want to be away from you
- They may start bedwetting or thumb sucking (or other "babyish" behaviours)
- They may be unable to concentrate on their school work
- They may become naughty and attention-seeking
- They may become irritable and disobedient
- They may complain of physical symptoms like headaches and stomach aches
- They may not want to go to school
- They may regress to behaving as they did as a younger child
- They might start to have panic attacks

#### **4. What sort of things do children find most upsetting?**

There are regular items in the media about all the things which are supposed to be worrying children. Most recently bullying has been featured, and now it is suggested that more and more children are stressed out because of SATS tests.

##### **But what do children themselves think?**

I interviewed over 100 ordinary Year 6 children in 5 primary schools, who were not seen as having problems, and asked them what really upset them and the answers were as follows:

- Someone close to them dying (32% of the group indicated this)
- Someone in my family going into hospital (23%)
- Having to go into hospital myself (10%)
- One of my parents leaving home (10%)
- Starting school or nursery (6%)
- Changing teachers in the middle of a year (6%)

As well as these really upsetting things, I asked them what other things they worried about and the list included:

- Arrival of a brother or sister
- Changing school
- Going to live with a different family
- A new mum or dad coming into the family
- Coming into care

#### **5. Why do children get upset?**

Like us, children can react badly to changes which are imposed upon them, because:

- They don't like losing control of things as they are now
- They are fearful of the "new situation"
- They usually would not have chosen to make the change

But unlike us, children are also very strongly affected by the fears and anxieties that they see in adults\_and many children have said to me "I was only worried because mum/dad seemed to be in a state about something!"

#### **6. Will they get over the upset?**

Some serious life events (like the death of someone close), will stay with the child for ever. Children are surprisingly tough emotionally, and the evidence (and my personal experience from bereavement counselling) shows that with good support from their families, most children can deal with the most upsetting life events imaginable.

With most life changes, the anxiety will be around for a short time (more the worries about what "might happen") but these are quickly put behind the child in most cases.

There is some evidence to show that the children who are most affected by a major trauma (such as an accident or a death of someone close), or don't get over it very well, are from the following 2 categories:

- they had personal problems before the event
- they did not get the best sort of parental support afterwards

NB. There is some growing concern about depression in children and if your child persists with some of the above symptoms for a long period of time (6 months or more), then you should seek professional guidance from a Psychologist.

## 7. What sort of things do children need specialist help for?

Childline, the organisation which children can phone when they are worried, points out that children call up more about bullying, than any other area, but my research shows that bereavement and loss was the area of most concern, and that bullying was only of concern to 20% of worried children.

A group of counsellors, whom I supervised, saw over 200 children (aged between 10 and 15), who were referred for help because staff, parents and the children themselves were concerned about the children's emotional health.

Some were naughty, or were clearly very upset, but many were just sad and not able to relate to other children or to their adult carers.

The problems that these young people (who really needed special help), talked about in counselling were often different to the things that worried their parents and teachers and are listed below.

(ie of the 200 children, 70% raised problems about bereavement and loss, and 65% raised issues about family changes etc):-

### Key

H – were home based problem (7 areas of concern)

S – were school based (5 areas of concern)

C – were within the child themselves (7 areas of concern)

Areas raised by the children in counselling:

- **bereavement and loss** (70%) – H – e.g. the painful memories of losing someone close to them
- **changes in their family make-up** (65%) – H – e.g. new parent or step siblings
- **relationship difficulties between them and family members** (55%) – H – e.g. arguments with parent or sibling
- **relationship difficulties between them and teachers** (55%) – S – e.g. falling out with particular teachers
- **family breakdowns** (53%) – H – e.g. parents arguing then one leaving
- **hospitalisations of themselves or family members** (50%) - H
- **problems controlling their temper** (40%) – C – e.g. getting into major arguments, fights at home or in school
- **moving house** (35%) – H – e.g. a new place, new neighbourhood, new friends, new school and leaving the old behind
- **relationship difficulties with other children** (35%) – S – e.g. either not being able to make new or able to keep friends
- **feeling depressed** (35%) – C – e.g. various levels of severe sadness, even feeling suicidal
- **having behaviour problems** (30%) – C – e.g. where child knows they can't control themselves, or gets into trouble anywhere
- **having moods/emotions out of control** (30%) – C – e.g. severe "teenager behaviour" like a "Kevin"
- **moving schools** (30%) – S – e.g. where they have to adjust to different staff, different rules, different friends
- **problems with physical health** (28%) – C – e.g. health problems keeping them away from friends, school and activities
- **problems with self-esteem** (28%) – C – e.g. having a very low opinion of themselves
- **problems with their own body-image** (25%) – C – e.g. feeling they are too fat, too thin, or look odd in some way
- **learning difficulties** (23%) – S – e.g. usually some form of dyslexia, where people think that they are "thick"
- **having to look after younger siblings** (20%) – H – e.g. where the level of care needed is unreasonable for a young child
- **bullying** (20%) – S – e.g. where the child's life is seriously affected by others bullying

## 8. WHAT CAN I DO TO STAY CALM AND HELP THEM THROUGH?

### THE GENERAL RULES FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH ALL LIFE EVENTS

- **Tell them what they need to know**
  - Give them the facts, at a level they'll understand
  - Be honest (about the facts) not just your feelings or what you believe
  - Tell them if you don't know the answer (don't make it up)
  - Be prepared to challenge some of the rumours and lies that might be in the press or gossiped about
- **Re-assure them that things will be alright**
  - Assure them that they will "get through"
  - Tell them that things will get better eventually
  - Give them personal examples of how you coped yourself
  - Remind them of all the things which won't be changing
- **Keep the routines and family life constant**
  - Don't change the "ordinary things" they and you do
  - Treats are fine, but not all the time
  - The child's own space and time is really important
- **Calm down and don't panic about your own fears**
  - If you are worried, share these with the adults in your family (not the children)
  - Focus on practical advice for your children
  - Notice how your being calm helps calm the child down
  - Don't escalate the child's worries by over-reacting yourself
  - Practise a relaxation technique yourself
- **Don't project your own fears/anger onto your children**
  - Be aware that children react much more to feelings than words you use
  - Find out if they are reacting more to your behaviour than the particular life event
  - If you can't separate your feelings from the event, get your partner or a relative to talk to your child
- **Find enjoyable things for you all to do**
  - However upsetting the event, you still deserve to have some enjoyable things to do
  - Don't put off planned treats, because "It's not the right thing to do"
  - Little things, like reading a story at bedtime, will still be very important
- **Listen to and talk to your child**
  - Find a time to have a chat without others interrupting
  - It's better to be doing something together (shopping, washing up, going for a walk) rather than "having a face-to-face talk"
  - Try to develop an attitude of "I'm interested, but not really bothered if you don't want to talk!"
- **Just be there**
  - Plenty of hugs and cuddles
  - Keep on doing "the ordinary things"
  - Tell them how much you love them, and how special they are to you
  - Keep up the old "stupid family jokes"

## HOW CAN I DEAL WITH A CHILD'S REACTIONS TO STRESS?

### 1. The child who develops sleeping problems

Children who are worried may experience a range of sleep related problems. These include being afraid of going to sleep, waking up with bad dreams or "in a state", or waking up very early in the morning.

If the child has settled into a regular sleeping pattern, then suddenly changes, this may indicate that something is worrying them.

#### Tips

- Follow the general rules on the previous page in order to find any possible reason.
- Reassure the child that "bad dreams" happen to us all, although they are scary, they are not real, just our mind making things up.
- Re-establish a new pattern to "wind-down" to bedtime ( doing too much activity, or eating late makes our minds race and stops us from getting to sleep)
- Use a relaxing activity like story-telling, story tapes (not TV) as a means of relaxing before bedtime.
- Spend time yourself with the child before they go to sleep.
- If they wake up in the night, cuddle them and re-assure them, then take them back to their own bed (it's not a good idea to take them into your bed, its better to take the trouble to make their own bed and bedroom a "safe haven"
- If they wake up very early, try to get them to stay in bed by allowing them special toys or activities to play with.

### 2. The child who starts to wet the bed.

About 75% of children are dry at night by the time they are eight. Some children are relatively older in developing bladder control, and continue to wet the bed when they are older. Most children will have occasional "accidents" as they are beginning to establish control.

Emotional or "secondary" bedwetting occurs when a child who has been dry for a long time (about 6 months), starts to wet the bed again regularly and is often a result of a trauma or the child beginning to worry.

When older children wet the bed, they really get upset, by what has happened, and the bed wetting itself can add to the child's stress.

You getting upset or angry will only make things worse.

#### Tips

- Follow the general rules in order to find out any reason.
- Try to be "matter of fact", get them to strip clean the bed and put bedclothes and nightie/pyjamas in the washing machine.
- Don't get angry, laugh at them or allow other family members (particularly other children) to make fun of them.
- You can start by a LOW KEY PROGRAMME
  - have a start chart where you reward the child for a dry bed
  - wake them up as late at night as you can for a wee
  - wake them up very early in the morning for a wee, then put them back for an hour or so
  - give special treats for improvements over time (ie 3 dry beds per week – then 4 and so on)
- If this is not working then this is a very effective INTENSIVE PROGRAMME, which is based on the child, over-learning bladder control (ie they wet the bed when they are most deeply asleep, so they learn to keep their bladder release tense, when the rest of their body is most relaxed).

- Get them to practice stopping weeing mid-flow (ie sitting or standing at the loo – wee-stop-wee-stop-wee-stop). This increases their awareness of a full bladder.
- Get the child (during the day) to tell you when the need to go for a wee. Distract them for about 5 minutes before letting them go for a wee.
- Explain what you are doing and gradually (step by step) increase the time between them telling you that they want a wee, and actually going to wee. Work up over about 3 weeks to about 30 minutes. Use distracting strategies, talking to them, send them on errands etc – to help them "hold it" for as long as they can.
- In my experience – children who can "hold their wee" for 30 minutes will no longer wet the bed!

### **3. The child who regresses to an earlier stage of development (becomes babyish)**

Some children react to stress and worry by behaving like a younger child. This is called regression and can mean they become fearful or anxious (afraid to go places they had happily gone before), become more clingy and demanding towards you and possibly start thumb-sucking or some other behaviour that they had "left behind".

#### **Tips**

- Follow the General Rules on page 22 to try and find out the reason for the worries.
- Do not get angry or make a joke of the issue.
- Be reassuring and encourage "grown up" behaviours.
- Give more attention to behaviours which are expected of his/her age.
- Give little attention to "babyish" behaviours.
- Think of this as a "phase" which is likely to pass relatively quickly (not your child becoming a "wimp").

### **4. The child who suddenly becomes "naughty"**

It is quite common for children who are worried to suddenly appear to change their personality and start to do all sorts of naughty things (that before they would never have done). This is called "attention-seeking behaviour", but it is not done deliberately. Subconsciously they have learned that you will get angry and react more strongly to "naughty" rather than "good" behaviour so in this way being naughty means that they get more of your attention.

#### **Tips**

- Follow the General Rules on page 22 and try to find out the reasons for the worries.
- Be reassuring and give lots more attention for him/her being well behaved (eg a spontaneous hug, kiss, pat on the head, a compliment or a treat).
- Ignore as much of the "low level" naughty behaviour as you possibly can. (I know this is hard, but I prefer to use the expression – "Choosing not to react to attention-seeking!").
- Think of this as a phase – rather than your previously "well behaved" child starting on a downward spiral to becoming a "delinquent".

## 5. The child who suddenly loses interest in everything

When they are worried or stressed many children who were keen and enthusiastic lose interest in the activities they used to like and may listlessly flit from one to another, lie about and complain of "being bored!" They may also lose their ability to concentrate on things they previously spent hours of concentrated time on.

If they are not "a teenager" or "in love" then this may indicate that they are worried about something.

### Tips

- Follow the General Rules on page 22 in order to find out why he/she is worried, and try to address these worries.
- Spend some time helping to re-awaken the interest, but "being there" while the child engages in the activity.
- Set little targets for the child to achieve (eg go and do "it" for 10 minutes, then come and talk to me, then you can go back for another 10 minutes etc).
- Discuss with the child about a possible "new activity" which will "be more interesting for the moment", and set this up with him/her.
- Explain that his/her lack of interest is because of the worry, and that the child may choose to not do these things for a while (but they can "go back to them at any time").
- Understand that this is a phase, and that the child's enthusiasm and concentration will come back soon.

## 6. The child who develops "new" physical symptoms

Whenever they are worried or stressed, some children react by developing physical symptoms like headaches or pains in their tummy. Doctors call these psychosomatic, which means that they "do not have a physical cause" and are caused by the worry.

It does not mean that the "pain is not real" or that they are "making it up."

With some children the headaches can develop into migraines (where they have to lie down in a darkened room and possibly given some anti-migraine tablets). In others the tummy pains can result in the child vomiting and developing what is called "stomach migraine."

The onset of such physical symptoms is always worrying, particularly as we always think that it might be something more serious like a brain tumour.

NB. Whenever your child starts to suffer from severe or continuous headaches or pain in other parts of the body – always seek medical attention.

### Tips

- If your GP has investigated and has assured you that there are no physical reasons why your child has these symptoms, then you can follow these tips.
- Use the General Rules (on page 22) to try and find out what he/she is worried about and try to deal with it.
- Re-assure your child (following the doctor's advice) that these pains are not life threatening.
- Give the right levels of medication/care to reduce the symptoms.
- Don't let the pain stop the child from doing any activity (ie it may have started in order to avoid going to school, going out etc).
- Play down the low level problem (a slight headache or tummy pain).

- You might develop a “magic pill” (eg a vitamin tablet or some other harmless item) or “magic cream” which you can use to convince your child has magical curative properties and is guaranteed to “make them feel better.”
- Work out with your doctor the best ways of dealing/treating the most severe migraines etc.

## **7. The child who suddenly stops wanting to go to school**

Some children’s anxiety comes out by their suddenly becoming anxious about leaving home and going to school. This is sometimes called school phobia or separation anxiety and is more related to their worrying and stress rather than any particular problem in school.

It is different from the anxiety they face when they first go into school and happens with an older child, who apparently has “settled” in the school/nursery setting they are in.

### **Tips**

- Firstly speak to your school/nursery to find out if there are any difficulties there (with other children or particular adults).
- Follow the General Rules (on page 22) in order to find out what might be worrying your child.
- Don’t jump to conclusions that it is always a school-based problem, because children often give this answer to keep from being sent out of the house.
- Work with the school co-operatively to reward him/her for going in and get “special attention” from the staff.
- See if you can negotiate little jobs or responsibilities in school so that he/she’s starting to look forward to going.
- Set up an “ET phone home” arrangement with the school (ie the child is allowed one short phone call a week home to speak to you). In my experience, anxious children use this as a safety-net, and rarely need to use it.
- If they “get in a state” or start having a panic attack (see the next section).
- Keep at it and things will get better!

## **8. The child who starts to have panic attacks**

A small number of children who are stressed or worried will suddenly develop panic attacks. These can take different forms, such as completely freezing up (rooted to the spot, not saying anything), over-breathing and obviously in a panic, screaming hysterically or having an asthma attack without any provocation.

When they occur, for the first time, they are frightening for both you and your child, and you may want to seek professional advice from your doctor, health visitor or school nurse, just to reassure yourself that there is no other problem present.

The panic attack is not usually deliberate, but usually results in the child being comforted and not made to carry out a particular action. The child then learns that the panic attack is a way of avoiding things which are less interesting or boring.

### **Tips**

- Refer to a medical specialist to find out if there are any physical reasons for the problem.
- Check with school (and relatives if your child stays with them) whether or not it happens away from you.
- Follow the General Rules (on page 22) in order to find out and deal with the reason for the panic.
- Teach the child the relaxation which is outlined in the appendix, ie go through this step-by-step and practise this when your child is not “in a state.”

## HOW CAN I HELP WITH PARTICULAR LIFE EVENTS?

### i) Going to school/nursery for the first time

This is the first major life event for many children.

- Most of the stress in children comes from your anxieties, fears and sense of loss about leaving your child in someone else's care
- Nearly all children get a little upset at being left, but grow out of it very quickly
- A few children have a prolonged reaction (called separation anxiety) and you may need help for this
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#### Tips

- Get your child used to your being away, by going out and leaving with babysitters
- Try to arrange sleepovers with relatives, so they know you can leave, but will still come back for them
- Think positively about leaving the child (and don't convey your own upset and feelings)
- When you pick the child up – don't talk about "all the things you've done in his/her absence"
- Focus on all the positive things he/she's done at school
- Try to link up with other parents so your children can continue friendships out of school

### ii) Birth of a brother or sister

This is always a disruptive time, and all children will show some reactions.

- They are no longer "the baby" in the family
- You will be "exhausted" – having given birth and have the demands of a new baby
- There will be far less time available for the older child

#### Tips

- Talk about what will happen when new baby arrives
- Prepare the child for his/her change of role – from being "mum's baby" to "mum's little helper"
- Always find time to give him/her some "special time"

### iii) Change of house

Many parents are surprised, but this is one of the more upsetting things in a child's life. Many children in care report that they miss their own family homes more than the people in them.

- Their own space, bedroom, house, neighbourhood is extremely important for all children
- It takes time to adjust to a new place (even if there is more space, bedroom on their own, better neighbours etc)
- Changing the place we live is often associated with other changes like friends, schools, neighbours etc
- What is seen to be important to us as adults, can't really be appreciated by our children

#### Tips

- Don't move unless you really have to
- Move at the end of a key stage for your child if possible (nursery/reception, end Year 2 /Year 6)
- If you move nearby, try to keep your child at the same school
- If there is a family break-up, try to keep the child in the same family home
- It'll take longer for children to accept the change appreciate the new situation than adults
- Keep emphasising the positive aspects of the change
- Re-create some of the reassuring things of the old house (initially have similar bedroom designs)
- Keep up with old neighbours and friends

#### iv) Someone close to the child dying

This is what children find most upsetting, but is inevitable at some time for all of us.

- It is the first time that they are confronted with the fact that all of us will die someday (including you and themselves)
- Younger children don't understand the finality of death but react to the grief of surviving adults
- The experience of losing a favourite pet may prepare the child for when they lose a close relative.

#### Tips

- Try to maintain the child's feelings of security, of being cared for, of being loved.
- Try to maintain all the necessary practical care for the child.(e.g. ensuring that they are eating, caring for themselves, sleeping etc)
- Keep up the routine's (of home/and school) so that "life goes on", but be prepared to accommodate some outbursts or extreme reactions by providing "time-out".
- Be honest with yourself and the child (at the child's own level of understanding.)
- Continue to listen (even if the same questions reappear), to talk and communicate.
- Do not pretend to believe what you don't believe, about what has happened.
- Try to understand the child's feelings (as a child of their particular age) and reassure where possible that their reactions are perfectly normal.
- Don't be afraid to say 'I don't know!' You can't be expected to have all the answers.
- Don't be afraid to share your own feelings, even if you get a bit upset. It will help to explain that adults also have these deep and confusing feelings (which we normally keep private).
- Remember there are others who can help. Find another adult to offload to on regular basis (a person who can listen, understand and comment) Supporting a child can be upsetting and emotionally very demanding, and it is very important to get this personal support.
- Don't be afraid to admit to family, friends and managers that you can't cope at any particular time.
- Support can come from:
  - friends, family are the natural supporters
  - colleagues at work (peers and managers)
  - religious and community leaders
  - specialist bereavement support groups
  - psychologists or counsellors
  - medical practitioners

#### v) Someone going into hospital

- Many children associate going into hospital with dying (having seen elderly relatives doing this)
- Hospital dramas tend to highlight severe incidents and blood and gore
- They are frightening places with different equipment, sights and smells

#### Tips

- Tell the child as much as you can about the process (there is lots of evidence that even when the child has a terminal condition, knowing the facts can really help them to cope)
- Get advice and guidance from specialist nursing teams(particularly when the child itself is going in)
- Take the child to visit and give them practical tasks to do( even if it is to tell a specific story to the patient)

## vi) Someone in the family being seriously ill

- children get very angry at never being told how ill someone is or what might be wrong with them
- they react to the behaviour and secrecy of the family without knowing why
- many children will imagine that things are much worse than they are, or that their relative is in far greater pain and discomfort than they really are

### Tips

- Answer the child's questions as honestly as you can, at his/her level of understanding
- Ask them what they might be worried about and see if you can allay some of their fears
- If you don't know something, admit to it

## vii) Family break-up

- This is extremely difficult as the adults cannot manage their own feelings and continue to be objective when trying to deal with the children
- Children will ask so many "Why?" questions that you will not be able to answer
- However "reasonable" the break-up is for everyone's sake, it will still be seen as unreasonable by the children
- There is the emotion and turmoil of the break up, followed by the difficulties of living and maintaining contact from separate homes.

### Tips

- Try to plan the final separation (if you can) so that it doesn't coincide with any major life events for the children (such as changing school)
- Try to keep the adult conflicts/arguments separate from your joint responsibilities to the children
- Make predictable, planned arrangements for joint care and contact (and stick to these)
- Try to keep the child's life the same as it was before the split (same material things, same routines, same activities, same toys etc). When the child is visiting the separated parent, then it might be better to leave toys, equipment etc in the same place that the child left them (as if everything stopped and waited for the child to return).
- Understand that however "bad or unacceptable" it was for you in the past, the children will keep on hoping for a reconciliation.
- Try to agree between the adults a common version of "why you had to separate" and present this consistently to the children when they ask "Why?"
- However your new relationship changes the childcare arrangements, realise that your relationship with your children as "Mum & Dad" will always be special.
- Be sensitive to the Step parent role, and develop this as an "extra-parent" not a "replacement".

## viii) Having to change school

Children have to change schools for a variety of reasons, but in most cases they would not have chosen to make this change e.g.

- a) The normal change they have to make because of their age such as that from primary to secondary
- b) A change of school, decided by their parents, because of other reasons such as moving house, a decision to move them to a different school or the child needing to go to a special school or unit
- c) School closing down
- d) **a) Making changes at the normal times**

All children reluctantly get to expect to make such changes (e.g. from playgroup to nursery to reception, and from class to class and teacher to teacher). Many of these changes can be upsetting on a temporary basis as the child may be very attached to a particular teacher or classroom base, and have heard “bad stories and rumours” about a particular teacher they are about to go to.

As you remember most of these “worries” turn out to be unfounded and most children get over them after a very short period of time. This is helped by the fact that in most cases schools try to keep the same group of children together as they move up to the school. (they do occasionally have to re-organise the social group usually because of particular problems with learning, behaviour or teaching groups).

Choosing a secondary school for your child is always difficult as we hear so many “bad things” about schools and very few of the “good things” that they are doing. In most cases you will choose the school that the majority of children from your primary school will go to, so your child will go along with his/her friends.

#### Problems

- Your own experiences of “going to the High School”(particularly if these were bad)
- Rumours and stories spread by older brothers/sisters and those in the neighbourhood
- Local gossip about the “goings on” in the High School
- Your own experiences with some of the older “tearaways” who might still be attending the school

#### Tips

- Follow the General Rules on page 22 to try and find out the reason for any worries your child may have.
- Talk to other parents whose children made the transition successfully last year
- Make sure you go to visit the new High School and have a list of questions with you before you go, and ask them
- Go to all the Open Days (with your child) and get him/her to find out as much as possible
- Make sure that your child takes part in the Transition Programme that the High School will organise and follow all the tips in the information booklet that they send you.
- \* If your child continues to be worried, speak to the first year tutor and tell him/her about these worries (I’m sure that they will then “look out” for any particular problems and perhaps arrange for extra support for your child.
- Try to be concerned for but not overanxious for your child.

#### b) Making a decision yourself to change your child’s school

This may be beyond your control such as when you are moving house and it is too far for the child to travel to the old school. It may be because of a particular problem in the old school (with other pupils or a member of staff) or that you decide that your child’s needs would be better met in another school.

Whatever the reasons, such changes are disturbing to most children as they will be leaving a place they know (for a new and unknown territory), they will be leaving established sets of friends and children they know (and have to make new friends and fit into a new teaching group).

In my experience, children who have changed schools several times will have particular problems of adjustment which last a long time and are often underachieving in school. These include such things as:-

- being able to quickly make friends , but not being able to keep them
- having gaps in their abilities from having missed out on key areas of learning
- being a “class clown” in order to get attention by being laughed at
- being naughty because of “attention-seeking” behaviour
- getting “blamed” for behaviours that others seem “to get away with”

#### Tips

- Only change your child’s school as a last resort
- Follow the General Rules on page 22 to try and find out the reason for any worries.
- Talk to them about the “ups and downs” of friendships (ie relationships are not always “perfect”)
- Find out as much as possible about the new school.
- \* Tell them as much as possible about your child (particularly what his/her strengths are, but also any problems he/she might have).
- \* Although a “fresh start” might be a way of leaving some difficulties behind, schools can be really helpful in helping your child to “turn over a new leaf”, if they know what is going on.
- Get in to see you new Head and class teacher and keep in regular contact for the first few months.
- Share any worries as soon as you know, so that they can help in school.

- Consider getting your child involved in new activities so that they can make friends in this way.
- Try and make new friends yourself, with parents of children in the new school.

### c) Having to change school because of a school closure

Having to change your school because it is closing is particularly upsetting for many children because it is like a combination of the above two changes ie

- all the children have to move at the same time (like a secondary transition)
- the decisions to close are made by adults, and children's wishes are not taken notice of (like the school change you decide upon)

In addition there are other pressures such as:

- all the emotional discussion by adults before the school finally closes
- the long term affects of any campaign to "Save our School" as the battle may be lost
- the upsetting affects upon all the adults in the school
- the time it takes and the gradually loss of friends (whose parents move them to new schools) and adults (who get new jobs and move)

### Tips

- Follow the General Rules on page 22 to try and find out the reason for any worries. Once you have identified these worries – reassure them
- Talk to your child and listen to them (however silly or petty they sound).
- Keep a balance of remembering the "good things" about the old school, with the "advantages" of the new school.
- Do not let your own feelings and attitudes about the rights and wrongs of the closure, get in the way of supporting your child with the practical process of "settling into" a new school.
- Accept the fact that your child will continue to miss things about their old school, long after the change to a new school.
- Find out as much as possible about the new school.
- Tell them as much as possible about your child (particularly what his/her strengths are, but also any problems he/she might have).
- Although a "fresh start" might be a way of leaving some difficulties behind, schools can be really helpful in helping your child to "turn over a new leaf", if they know what is going on.
- Get in to see you new Head and class teacher and keep in regular contact for the first few months.
- Share any worries as soon as you know, so that they can help in school.
- Consider getting your child involved in new activities so that they can make friends in this way.
- Try and make new friends yourself, with parents of children in the new school.

### ix) Sitting exams/SATS tests

As all children now have to take these formal exams at a young age, we are finding that many children are becoming worried and stressed out by the experience ie:

- Many worry about "doing well" and getting "a good result".
- Some worry about not feeling well or at their best during the day.
- Some are frightened that the tests will be so hard that they will make a complete idiot of themselves.
- Some even worry about needing to go to the toilet and not being able to sit for such a long day.

## Tips

- Follow the General Rules on page 22 to try and find out the reason for any worries.
- Do not put too much pressure on your child by telling them how well you expect them to do.
- Talk through any concerns with your child's teacher so that she can reassure your child (and any other child taking the tests).
- Remember that the results are made up from a combination of Teacher Assessment and Test results.
- Get your child to use a structured preparation system.
  - KNOWING what is expected in the exam
  - REDUCING the subject to manageable chunks
  - ORGANISING yourself and the work
  - OVERLEARNING to avoid forgetting
  - PRACTISE doing the work before the exam
  - RELAXING enough so that you don't panic
  - ANSWERING the questions being asked
  - WORK TOGETHER with your friends to support each other
  - ASK FOR HELP from your parents and teachers
- If your child has Special Educational Needs, it is possible to get help to complete the SATs (discuss this with your child's teacher).

## x) Bullying

This has always been a source of worry and stress for children in school. Research has shown that 3 out of every 5 children have suffered from bullying at some time and that 20% (1 in 5) have suffered severe bullying which has upset their lives. Many of the calls to Childline are from children who are victims of bullying.

Although some bullying takes the form of physical attacks, children say that emotional and psychological bullying (eg where other children say things about them or their families, start-up rumours about them, or influence other children against them) are far more hurtful and upsetting.

At its extreme, children have run away from home, hurt themselves or attempted suicide as a way of getting away from the pressure.

As well as using "fear" to control their victims, bullies also use the reluctance to "tell tales" (or "grass") to teachers and adults, as a way of keeping the victims quiet.

Other children (who are not bullies), often know who is being bullied, but choose to "mind their own business" because they are afraid that the bully might turn on to them (this is called the Bystander Effect).

## Tips

- Follow the General Rules on page 22 and try and find out what your child is worried about.
- Try to decide whether the problem is a typical disagreement between children (the usual sort of falling out of friendships that all kids go through) – or whether it is more serious and needs you to intervene to prevent things getting worse.
- Talk to your child and point out that:
  - no-one should have to suffer being bullied
  - telling your teachers in school is not "grassing" because if you do not tell, then the bullies will still be getting their own way.
- The bullying will not stop until you get help from school.
- Approach a teacher who can do something about the problem, and work with them to make things better.
- All schools have a Bullying Policy, which shows how they recognise and deal with the problem. Ask them for a copy and discuss how it can help your child.
- Any plan you develop with the school should be designed to:
  - stop the bullying

- protect your child
  - restrict the influence of the bullies
  - protect any other child from becoming a victim
- Keep the conversations going with your child to make sure that "things have really got better".

### **xi) Changing teachers in the middle of the year**

We know how important the relationship between children and their teacher is and primary schools are organised so that the children spend a year at a time with the same class-teacher (although they may spend some time with other teachers or have 2 part-time teachers working together) Unfortunately due to staff moving jobs, becoming ill or leaving for personal reasons, it is sometimes a reality that some classes end up with a series of temporary teachers in a year.

We know that these children are very upset by losing their teacher in the middle of the year.(6% of them told me so), and there is some evidence that in classes affected this way the children's behaviour is poor and their school work is at a lower level than should be expected for their ability.

When children transfer to the High School, the constant change of teachers from lesson to lesson (ie they need to get used to 10-12 teachers each year), and the lack of time to really form a special relationship with a particular teacher, is difficult for some children.

#### **Tips**

- Follow the General Rules on page 22 and try and find out what your child is worried about.
- \* Share your concerns with the Headteacher and/or Year Tutor and see if there are ways in which the child's worries can be met/reassured.
- \* See if you can identify a constant adult figure for your child to relate to (e.g. the class support assistant may have always been there)
- \* If this only happens for one school year then it may just be unlucky. However if this happens to your child's class more than once then this is unfair and you need to speak to the Headteacher and the Parent Governor because it is now having a serious effect on your child's education.

## THE GENERAL RULES FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH LIFE EVENTS

- **Tell them what they need to know**
  - Give them the facts, at a level they'll understand
  - Be honest (about the facts) not just your feelings or what you believe
  - Tell them if you don't know the answer (don't make it up)
  - Be prepared to challenge some of the rumours and lies that might be in the press or gossiped about
- **Re-assure them that things will be alright**
  - Assure them that they will "get through"
  - Tell them that things will get better eventually
  - Give them personal examples of how you coped yourself
  - Remind them of all the things which won't be changing
- **Keep the routines and family life constant**
  - Don't change the "ordinary things" they and you do
  - Treats are fine, but not all the time
  - The child's own space and time is really important
- **Calm down and don't panic about your own fears**
  - If you are worried, share these with the adults in your family (not the children)
  - Focus on practical advice for your children
  - Notice how your being calm helps calm the child down
  - Don't escalate the child's worries by over-reacting yourself
  - Practise a relaxation technique yourself
- **Don't project your own fears/anger onto your children**
  - Be aware that children react much more to feelings than words you use
  - Find out if they are reacting more to your behaviour than the particular life event
  - If you can't separate your feelings from the event, get your partner or a relative to talk to your child
- **Find enjoyable things for you all to do**
  - However upsetting the event, you still deserve to have some enjoyable things to do
  - Don't put off planned treats, because "It's not the right thing to do"
  - Little things, like reading a story at bedtime, will still be very important
- **Listen to and talk to your child**
  - Find a time to have a chat without others interrupting
  - It's better to be doing something together (shopping, washing up, going for a walk) rather than "having a face-to-face talk"
  - Try to develop an attitude of "I'm interested, but not really bothered if you don't want to talk!"
- **Just be there**
  - Plenty of hugs and cuddles
  - Keep on doing "the ordinary things"
  - Tell them how much you love them, and how special they are to you
  - Keep up the old "stupid family jokes"

## HOW TO RELAX AND CONTROL YOUR OWN STRESS

### Teaching your child to relax and relaxing yourself

The purpose is to make the child aware of the physical and mental changes which take place when they become tense, with the aim of allowing them to control themselves.

Help them to practise the technique when they're not "in a state", but assure them that they will be able to use it to stop getting into any more trouble.

They should then use relaxation sequence whenever they feel that they are getting into a "state" and starting to feel tense.

### Understanding what "being stressed" feels like

- Demonstrate tension in muscles by getting the child to tense their fist really tightly, hold it for 5 minutes, then relaxing it.
- Talk to the child about what it feels like to be tense, and what triggers the tension.
- Ask them to recall the last time they were very angry and to "replay" what happened.

*A typical memory might be an argument or "being told off"*

*Typical reactions are:*

- *feeling very hot or cold*
- *shaking or being incredibly tense*
- *being aware of tension in certain parts of the body like shoulders, arms, hands, legs*
- *having a heavy or hot or cold weight in the centre of the body – sometimes in the tummy, sometimes in the chest or throat*

*Afterwards many people suffer from:*

- *headaches*
- *pain in the neck and back of head*
- *shaking and/or breathlessness*
- *pains in the stomach*
- *bad taste in the mouth*

"What happened, who said what to whom?"

"What did you feel like (hot/cold/shaky etc)?"

"Where in your body did you feel hot/cold (tummy/chest/throat/head etc)?"

"Did these feelings change during the incident?"

"What did the tension feel like in (your arms/neck/head/tummy etc)?"

"What did you feel like afterwards (headache/upset/shaky etc)?"

### Positive self-talk

- Go through all the reasons why the child should not “get in a state” and get him/her to give you a list of reasons why he/she loses out by this.
- Put these reasons together into a SCRIPT for him/her to learn

### Example SCRIPT

Say to yourself:

“I'm not going to get into a state....

I'm not going to let (X) upset me.....

I don't have to lose control

It's being silly

I'm going to practise my relaxation

### Calm-Call Strategy SIGNAL

Where the child can't do this for himself without help it consists of the adult using a pre-arranged SIGNAL as a stimulus for the child to stop the behaviour and to start his relaxation-sequence.

This is used when the adult can sense or see that the child is getting tense or beginning to react to the situation. (body tensing, becoming agitated, starting to speak frantically, raise his/her voice etc)

It is a word or phrase designed to

- STOP the behaviour
- make the child THINK
- START the calming-down sequence

Example

“Billy **Stop-it, you're getting in a state!** “

“Take Deep breaths and count slowly 1 – 2 – 3 up to 20.....”

START THE RELAXATION SEQUENCE (below)

## RELAXATION SEQUENCE

This should be taught over several sessions N.B. when the child is quite relaxed and not tensed up

The approach consists of firstly standing/sitting still and make your whole body very tense, so tight and tense that it hurts, holding this for 5 seconds, then relaxing by letting all the tension go.

- Close your eyes and concentrate complete on yourself and how your body is feeling
- Practise using really Deep Breathing filling all your chest, breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth
- Counting very slowly with each breath from 1 – 10

At the same time

- start tensing your hands and arms alongside your body (so tight and tense that they hurt). Count 1
- then your feet and legs 2
- then your thighs and bottom 3
- then your tummy and chest 4
- then your back and shoulders 5
- then your neck and face 6
- make sure your eyes and mouth are really tight right up to the top of your head
- HOLD IT 10 – 20

Then relax slowly to as you continue to count up to 20, breathing each time you count.

- face and head 21
- shoulders and neck 22
- chest and back 23
- arms and hands 24
- tummy and bottom 25
- thighs, legs and feet 26
- (feel the warm blood coming back into your body as your muscles relax) 27
- 28 29
- KEEP ON RELAXING FURTHER AS YOU BREATHE IN AND OUT AND COUNT 30

- Now you feel calm and controlled and much better. You don't want to run away or hurt yourself or anyone else. You can now think more clearly about what is right to do.

- Say to yourself :  
"I've really done well...."

I have managed to control myself...

I've not got myself into a state.....

I've not run away or upset my teachers or my parents...

This is much better than before!!!!"

- **End signal**

"Now I don't need to lose it....."

I'm in control.....

I can think straight now.... I feel fine!"