7 ways parents can help kids adapt to change

Vic Ryckaert, vic.ryckaert@indystar.com 5:41 p.m. EST January 30, 2015

Redistricting is common for many Central Indiana school kids. Here are tips on how parents can help. Vic Ryckaert/The Star

School redistricting is a fact of life in the fast-growing suburbs.

When a community grows, administrators have to adjust school boundaries and balance class sizes. Next fall, Hamilton Southeastern will move about 2,600 kids to different schools; Center Grove is planning to move about 350 students.

Whether it's because of a new job, graduating from elementary to middle or redistricting, changing schools can be a stressful time for families. Here's how experts say parents can help their kids cope.

Don't panic

Children feed off their parents emotions so adults should keep their fears to themselves, said Eric Scott, a pediatric psychologist at Riley Hospital for Children at IU Health. When they hear Mom and Dad complain about school redistricting, kids internalize that stress and negative energy gets amplified.

"The parent's anxiety often will trigger the child's anxiety," Scott said. "The child's anxiety rises, and that will trigger the parent's anxiety. There's almost this race to the top."

Stay positive

Keep a good attitude and point out all the exciting and new opportunities a child will have in the new school, said Greta Pennell, a psychologist and associate professor of education at the University of Indianapolis.

"If parents have a specific worry, be upfront but try not to over-react," Pennell said. "Emphasize the positive."

Enlist friends

Pennell and Scott agree that finding some classmates who are heading the new school can help ease the transition. Point out that the child will have friends.

"Find out who is going to be in that same school and make sure a kid will have some sort of social connection," Scott said.
Pennell added: "Anything parents can do to help kids stay in contact with their old friends and help them make new friends is going to help them transition to a new school."

**Remember success**

While children don't have a wealth of experience yet, they have overcome a lot of changes in life. They may change sports teams, they may move, maybe they have gone from Cub Scouts to Boy Scouts. Parents should remind children of their successes.

"Talking about other transitions that the child has successfully navigated or gone through in the past I think would be really helpful," Scott said.

**Stress continuity**

Find those things in a child's life that are not changing. Kids can still be involved in sports and clubs. School corporations try to keep neighborhoods together when redistricting, so it's likely that children will ride the bus with the same children. Point out the lines of continuity and be specific.

"Kids are concrete," Scott said, "so sometimes they need specific examples of all the things that will remain the same about their life even though they are making a school change."

**Get involved**

Parents should learn all they can about the new school. Look at the website. Go to an open house. Visit the building with your child. Show them the classrooms, cafeteria the lockers. This helps students get comfortable in the new building.

"If you can volunteer at the school, stay involved, stay in touch keep up to date," Pennell said, "it will ease your concerns and give you something to talk about with your child."

It's also very important to meet the principal and teachers.

"Teachers are going to be your allies," Pennell said. "If your child's struggling they are going to see it first."

**Pay attention**

Once school starts, monitor how your child is adapting to the new routine. Look for changes in sleeping or eating. Watch for mood swings and other signs of anxiety. Some of these behaviors are expected, Scott said, but the child should get back to normal within four to six weeks.

"If there's continuing problems," Scott said, "I would seek professional help because you may be looking at more of a stronger anxiety disorder."