

Parenting kids through the challenges of change



By Michael Grose

Parenting is always challenging, but perhaps never more so when you are undergoing change yourself.

Recently I spoke to staff at the General Motors Holden in South Australia about how they could help their families navigate the imminent plant closure, and subsequent loss of jobs. Change of this magnitude generally impacts on everyone in a family, bringing an added layer to parenting. Essentially the job of these parents was to help their children successfully navigate changes rather than isolate or protect them from the changes that will occur.

From a child's perspective, it's not the change itself but how parents react to adjustments that is most significant. Change tests individual and family resilience, but managing it well builds resilience. While most people yearn for certainty and consistency there will always be times when circumstances change – people shift jobs, families relocate and parents split up. These situations are difficult to manage at the time but inevitably people adjust and more often than not, end up with a better situation – a job that they enjoy; a better lifestyle or finding family peace.

While change is not easy to endure, there are some things we can do as parents to help our children cope and hopefully grow from those changes.

The following five ideas will help:

1. Acknowledge feelings

Every difficulty or challenge we face is accompanied by uncomfortable feelings such as sadness, anger and disappointment. When feelings aren't acknowledged, children will either act out or act in. That is, they will either become aggressive, agitated and hurtful or become moody, anxious and depressed. Give kids permission to talk about emotions by talking about your own feelings and your emotional reactions to events. Help children of all ages verbalise their feelings by asking children how they feel in response to different events. "How do you feel about this?" is a great way to initiate conversations on an emotional level.

2. Look after yourself (and your partner)

Change is usually stressful for adults. Feelings of anxiety are common in times of uncertainty. "Will life ever return to normal?" is a common question. Self-care is essential in times of change. It's hard to parent well when you are stressed, anxious or depressed so do all you can to stick to the building blocks of well-being.



parenting *ideas

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That is, sleep well (life's always better after a good night's sleep); get some exercise (to release the feel-good endorphins); actively maintain your support networks (talking about difficulties is therapeutic); get some relaxation (it's important to take your mind of your worries for a time) and pursue at least one interest that you enjoy (fun and play is an antidote to depression).

3. Stay optimistic

Optimism is characteristic of resilient people. I'm not suggesting that you take a Pollyanna-ish attitude that 'everything will be all right'. Instead project the attitude that the current situation may be difficult or that life at the moment may be difficult but you will get through this. "This too shall pass" is a powerful resilience concept for kids to experience and learn.

4. Maintain consistency and routine

When disruption appears in your life try to keep things as normal as possible for children. In particular, stick to regular mealtimes; keep bedtimes regular and keep the traditions that kids enjoy and bring your family together. This type of familiarity is comforting for kids, helping them maintain feelings of control, which is something they crave in times of change.

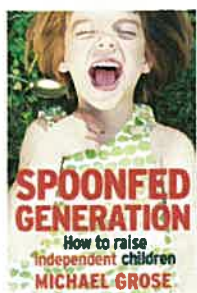
5. Maintain consistency and routine

Resilience is best practiced as a family or community, rather than as an individual so look for ways to bring your family together. Family mealtimes; shared enjoyable experiences and simply hanging out together are the types of activities that build strong families. In times of change and upheaval what we need most is each other.

Life is full of changes. Some are welcome and some aren't. It's human nature to resist change, particularly when it's unwelcome. But change also presents opportunities for growth and development. Helping kids cope with change, even when it happens to you, is a chance to build their resilience, which will be tested many times throughout their adult lives.



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