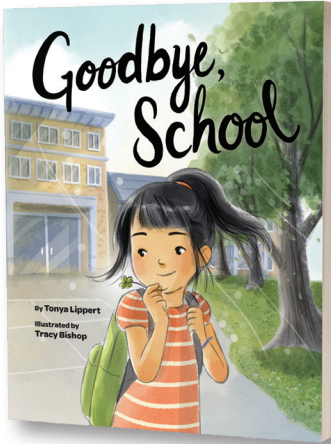




AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

How to Help Guide Kids Through Big Changes

by Tonya Lippert, PhD, LCSW



This is an excerpt from *Goodbye, School* by Tonya Lippert.

You can purchase the full book with 20% off and free domestic shipping [here](#). Enter code **MPKIDS20** at checkout.

All children experience changes and transitions — moving, changing schools, a friend leaving town. These changes can bring uncertainty and sadness about what a child may “lose”, such as friends, caregivers, teachers, comforting rituals. This is common even when there’s excitement about what may be next. Transitions and changes can become times where we recognize how much we care about someone or something. When we feel a sense of loss, it’s because we care.

Changes and transitions are not disconnected starts and stops from everyday life; they are bridges between the past and the future. You can help children carry a sense of wholeness and continuity through the impermanent landscapes of their lives.

Changes are bridges between the past and the future.

Below are a few guidelines and examples of what you can say to a child experiencing a change or transition. You’ll want to adjust what you say and how you say it according to a child’s developmental level and what you know about your child. Also, children often need repetition and may want to have the discussion more than once. Your child may repeat it to you, as they try to strengthen their understanding of what is happening.

Acknowledge the transition.

Acknowledge the change or transition and the feelings that often come with it. For example, you might say, “You are going to have a different school (home, class, etc.) now. People can feel a lot of different ways when something like this happens. Some kids feel sad, some scared, and some mad. Some might feel excited about some of the things that will be different.”

Express and validate feelings.

Ask about your child's feelings. Sometimes, children will only tell you something if you ask. You could ask, "How do you feel about going to a different school?" or "How do you feel about your friend moving away?"

Children may express their feelings directly or indirectly. They may cry. They may want to avoid the discussion. Either way, allow and accept the feelings and let children know their feelings make sense. Listen without expressing judgment about their feelings and without telling them what they should feel.

If a child expresses feelings directly, saying they are sad and/or mad, you might say, "Yeah, sometimes I also feel that way when things change but I want them to stay the same." If the child nods or otherwise shows that you've hit the mark, you might go further and recognize how hard it can be to accept what's out of our control. For example, you might add something along the lines of, "Sometimes I wish I had magic powers to make things be the way I want them."

If a child expresses feelings indirectly, try to see what these feelings are or may be. For example, if a child puts their head down, you might try, "You seem sad." If you get no response and the child seems open to talking, you can check your perception with, "Are you sad?"

Validate your child's feelings and guide them toward expressing them in a healthy manner. Let your child know it's normal to have more than one feeling at the same time, including sadness, anger, fear, excitement, and happiness. There may even be guilt. Avoid the temptation to distract children from their feelings or to focus excessively on the "bright side". Let them experience the loss. Connect the experience to the fact that they care. Tell your child that caring means someone or something was special and important to them and that, by caring, they keep what they love and have loved with them.

Say goodbye.

Assist your child with identifying a meaningful way to say goodbye to someone or something beloved. There are rituals that others have used as well as ones that your child can create, like how Franny in the book *Goodbye, School* by Tonya Lippert uses clovers to signify special moments in her classroom. Give them examples and model healthy ways of saying goodbye. For instance, you might say, "I wonder if there's a way to say goodbye to your school that shows how much you care about it?" or "How can you show your friend that you're really going to miss him?" Ask what they think or what they want to do. You may also ask your child whether they want help coming up with ideas, and here is where you can share goodbye or transition rituals that you or others have found useful in similar situations. The point is to guide them toward finding meaningful ways to honor connections they've had and keep them open to building future ones.

When to Seek Help

If a child becomes stuck and appears unable to attend to other areas of life for an extended period, then you may want to seek counseling. Most children, however, will find that expression and validation of their feelings, and saying goodbye, frees them to move forward.

This Article's Author

Tonya Lippert, PhD, LCSW, studied developmental psychology and clinical social work, is the co-author of a book on ADHA, was a visiting professor at Reed College, worked at the Oregon Social Learning Center, and currently runs mental health therapy groups at Kaiser Permanente. She lives in Portland, OR.