

Change and young children

Change - It is constant in our lives, but seems to affect each of us differently. The adults caring for young children in a primary role (parents and teachers) have first-hand clues into what change might tell us about children.

Identifying changes children experience prepares us to better understand each child's unique needs, such as how they cope with and process change. Identifying the various changes also makes us think about changes we might not be aware of. Using the headings below, add your examples of change children may experience (tip: compare with others caring for children):

- **Expected or part of 'normal life'** – example: changing clothes, going to childcare
- **Unexpected** – example: a surprise visitor, change in routine
- **Significant** – example: change in parental health, a parent being deployed
- **Changes caregivers may not be aware of** – example: a child's new fear, parent's job loss



As we observe children experiencing and responding to change, we may discover insights such as: how children learn, their unique thoughts and ideas, what is challenging, what their strengths and talents are, a measure of health (both physical well-being and emotional well-being), and most importantly, what requires immediate attention.

Most change is a result of natural experiences - the ebb and flow of life - and does not thwart healthy development, especially when there are loving, consistent, responsible adults buffering the difficult paths. There are, however, changes that expose children to toxic stress: a prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships and supportive adults. Toxic stress is the most damaging type of stress, such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and deep poverty. Harvard University's Center for the Developing Child states, "Toxic stress can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years."

Change may be difficult for children experiencing stress. A child experiencing high levels of stress or toxic stress may respond to change on a lower threshold; things may seem threatening and overwhelming. "A kitten becomes a tiger, a neutral face becomes angry... what gets turned on is harder to turn off" (Phillips 2010)

Change may also be difficult for children who are more sensitive to their environment. Deborah Phillips, researcher and author, indicates, "...some children need the right environmental conditions to thrive while others will often thrive regardless of the environment. So it is crucial for professionals to evaluate the needs of each child and adjust their environment to allow them to thrive." (Phillips 2011)

Change from the 'Child-Lens'

If we are to understand the changes children experience, adults need to look through the 'childlens': to think about what is known and understood from the child's individual point of view. It is helpful to think how the child is feeling and thinking, which may be very different than the adult.

Children build their understanding on experiences they may have had, not so much on experiences they might have in the future. Whether it's right or wrong, it's what they know. For example, even though three year old Emerson's family explained her mother's deployment (where she was going, when she was coming back, etc.), she still continued to ask, "Mommy will be here today, right?" Or think of the young child who assumes her teacher 'lives' at school; it's the only place she's seen him, so in her experience, that is where he 'lives.'

Having an awareness of children's temperament, the emotional and behavioral style of responding to the world, gives hints for caregivers to follow in responding and planning for change. For example, the child who is reluctant to try new experiences may need more time and discussion. The child who becomes overly-excited by change may need a pre-warning of the change, an adult's hand to hold, or even something soft to hold. Children respond best to change in an environment that includes positive, healthy relationships. These relationships are helpful navigators through change and early development. They supply an understanding of the individual child, an awareness of what is needed, and can be the alarm for what may be a worrisome path. Thinking about change helps us see what matters most.



References:

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