Changing beginning of the year challenges to opportunities to learn

The beginning of the school year always brings with it changes and with that challenges. Changes can cause anxiety for children as well as for parents. Sometimes children are disappointed at the beginning of the school year when they are separated from close friends or are allocated a teacher they aren’t familiar with or don’t “gell” with.

As parents we often get drawn into fixing things for them and trying to negotiate with schools to make things right.

However changes and challenges are not all bad. There is another way that we can view these. They are opportunities for your child to grow and develop a keener awareness of how he/she interacts with adults who may have a style that they are not familiar with.

It is also an opportunity for them to use their social skills and develop new relationships. It’s true that sometimes these new relationships cannot replace that special friend from last year, however it’s important for children to learn that the nature of relationships differ and that it’s important to make space in our lives for all kinds of friends. This may include ones we have fun with, ones we share interests with, ones we work well with and ones we can learn from because they challenge us.

So how do we as parents go about doing this without downplaying the difficulty of these changes for your child?
1. Name the feeling the child is experiencing (disappointment, fear, anxiety, unsettledness, loneliness)

2. Normalise that feeling and let the child know that people often have those feelings when things are unfamiliar and changing. You can give some examples of when you might have felt like that.

3. Give the child some space to think about how they might work through the issue themselves (How would they problem solve that issue?)

4. Help the child identify what they would like to work on to manage the situation better and help them break it down into small manageable tasks (For example looking at the other person, using their name and starting a conversation)

5. Plan for setbacks (what will happen if the other child says something rude back or ignores them?) Talk through the things that could go wrong

6. Let other people know that your child is working on this skill. You might even tell the teacher that your child is learning to manage meeting new friends and that they are practicing a specific skill (For example using a persons name to greet them). You can even recruit the teacher to be their supporter in this. When they notice your child practicing the skill they could praise them or let them know that they have noticed.

7. Ask your child about how they practiced the skill today, what worked and what they found challenging.

8. Once they have some success, let the people you recruited to be their supporters (dad, grandma, teacher, sibling etc) know and celebrate with them by having a special dinner, inviting the new friend for a play date, going to the park with the new friend after school etc.

It is always important to find the right time to attempt to have these conversations with your child. All children are different and it’s good to find a time when things are calm, you feel close to your child and they feel like talking.

Childhood is all about learning and growing so that one day our children will be independent and capable young adults. The challenges that come our way are great tools for learning. At the same time, if the circumstances are too challenging for your child and you feel that they are being impacted socially, behaviourally, physically or academically it’s good to talk to your school and to seek professional help.

Parent Line NSW is a state funded 24 hour professional counseling, support and information service to parents of children 0 – 18 across NSW.

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