

ASK A SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST: Experiencing Loss

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Part 3 of 3 - Loss of A Community

Experiencing loss is an unfortunate and difficult part of life; consequently, it is an experience that parents want to protect their children from for as long as possible. Regrettably, loss will touch a child's life at some point or another, so parents need information to help their children process and heal. Loss comes in many forms: death of a loved one, divorce/family separation or moving to a new city/town. I am writing about this topic in three issues of *Calgary's Child*: Part 1. *Loss of a Loved One* (Jan/Feb 2014 Issue); Part 2. *Loss of a Nuclear Family Unit* (Mar/Apr 2014 Issue); and Part 3. *Loss of a Community*.

By the age of 10, 50 per cent of Canadian children move at least once (Statistics Canada, 2006). It is common knowledge that one of the most stressful times in an adult's life is when they relocate to another community and start a new job. When children move to an unfamiliar community and start a different school, they also experience these significant changes as stressors. Parents can minimize the negative impact of the loss of a community on their children by being proactive and planning for this change. This entails intentionally facilitating their children's transition into unfamiliar surroundings, home and school, while nurturing the bonds that are left behind.

Stay in touch - In the 21st Century, children are able to maintain their friendships through technology such as email, Skype and FaceTime. Contact the parents of your children's closest friends and set up a communication plan before you move - have a trial run. Many adults fondly remember their 'Bestie' from elementary school and it is common for these childhood friendships to last lifetimes - help your children sustain these bonds.

Meet and greet - Contact the local school board to get information about schools. If your children have any unique learning needs, ask to speak to district staff about programming. Arrange for your children to visit their schools to meet staff and become familiar with the building in August (summer move) or after school (mid-school year move); it is preferable for children to explore the school building before adding in the social stress of meeting new classmates. In some cases, I suggest that the receiving school send photographs of relevant staff and the school so a social narrative can be written introducing the new environment.

As well, take the time to review with your children the school's website; it will provide teacher information and school activities. Once your children are attending their new schools, keep in touch with teachers regularly (email, phone, drop by) to ensure the transition is going smoothly. If you are able, volunteer in the school and attend school assemblies and special events.

Get involved - Explore your new community with your family. Go for family walks or bike rides, discuss with your children safety rules and geographical boundaries. Introduce yourself to your neighbors and other parents whenever possible - model for your children how to initiate conversations with unfamiliar people. Contact local organizations regarding sports, activities or groups that may be of interest to your children - get them involved. If the team is already picked for this year, can your child attend practices? Drop-in activities? Make an effort to connect your children to the community beyond school.

Moving away from friends and a cherished community is challenging; however, there is an opportunity to make more friends and take advantage of unique prospects. If you have relocated to Calgary, check out local nature centres, museums, play houses and play groups, etc., and attend a Calgary Stampeders game. Go as a family and enjoy your new community!

Dr. R. Coranne Johnson, R. Psych., has been working in the education field for 25 years as a teacher, administrator and school psychologist. She has also taught university courses in the areas of special education, psychology and program effectiveness. Through Dr. Johnson's work in schools, she has developed a wealth of knowledge about learning, literacy and special education. Dr. Johnson can be contacted through her website, www.helpingchildren.ca.