



7 Strategies for Preparing Children for New Experiences

Children become excited about holidays and special events, but new experiences and routine changes can be overwhelming. Make events fun, educational, and less stressful with these seven simple tips.

1. Help Children Understand When an Event Will Occur - Children can become very excited about activities. They may ask days or weeks in advance about plans. Help children gain an understanding of when an event will occur by marking it on the calendar and having a countdown. This strategy helps children better understand when an event will occur while working on simple math skills.

2. Set Expectations - New experiences often come with new rules and expectations. Be sure to set rules and expectations in advance. Prepare children by reading books on or role playing about the new experiences. Write rules down and review them. For trick-or-treating role play going to someone's door for candy. Have rules about going to homes with lights on, staying near an adult, and politely thanking neighbors for the treats.

3. Let Children Participate in Planning – Children will have more ownership in an event if they are able to help plan it. Let children help make a picnic lunch when going to a fall festival. Print a map of the zoo before going and include them in planning which animals to see at the zoo. Ask them to help pick out and wrap a birthday gift for a friend's party. These kinds of activities teach planning and independence skills that apply later in life.

4. Build on Existing Skills and Familiar Experiences - When children relate past situations or expectations to new ones they are able to build on existing knowledge. For example, if you are going to an amusement park you may tell a child the rules are similar to being at a mall. There will be many people, they have to stay with an adult, and there will be times when they have to wait in line. This allows children to have a parallel for their expectations and draw on their past experiences.

5. Leverage Opportunities for Learning – Whether counting Halloween candy, learning about new cultures during the holidays, or practicing greetings at a family reunion, events offer a multitude of opportunities for developing skills. Use naturally occurring events to teach new skills or develop emerging skills.

6. Use Visuals – Photographs, drawings, or lists can be used as reminders for rules, expectations, or schedules. Visuals can be viewed before, during, and after an event to set expectations, keep children on track, and review the experience. Make sure the choice of visuals is simple, understandable, and easy to access.

7. Reinforce Appropriate Behavior – Consistent and immediate reinforcement of appropriate behavior gives children a clear understanding of what they are doing correctly. People tend to note when children do things wrong rather than right. Be sure to positively and specifically identify correct behaviors. For example, "Ella, I like the way you just thanked Aunt Becky for your birthday gift."

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