

BEING THE "NEW KID" - WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO HELP

by Anne P. Copeland, Ph.D.; reprinted with permission from BR Anchor Publishing

Some children and teenagers love the chance to attend a new school and be the "new kid." They like feeling special. And they like the fact that no one knew them when they had that awful short haircut, before they learned to read, or when they were overweight!

Other children find making the transition to a new school difficult. For them, friends are hard-won and not easily replaced. A crowd of new kids elicits shyness not excitement. These children react to this challenge as they do to many other transitions in their lives: with reluctance.

In some ways, how children react to a new school is out of their parents' hands. Some children are naturally more at ease in new situations than others. And the structure of schools and the host country society also directly influence a child's experience. For example, about 17% of school-age children in the U.S. move to a different home each year, so being a "new kid" is pretty common. And in most American elementary schools, all children start in new class groups each year with a new teacher and children they may not know. From seventh to twelfth grades, most children move from class to class (and teacher to teacher) for different subjects throughout the school day, so "new kids" may not be very obvious.

Still, there are some ways parents can help:

- (1) Visit the school with your child ahead of time. Most schools will let you walk around and find the toilets, the lunchroom, the gym, etc. Ask to see the room your child will be in. If the teacher is there, it will be a nice, quiet moment to meet.
- (2) Play in the school playground. Even if your children do not "make friends" immediately, they will start to understand how children there look, dress, talk, and play. And the other children will begin to recognize them.
- (3) Let academics take a back seat for a while. Learning occurs more easily when children feel comfortable and stable. In the early days of a new school, it may be more important for your child to make friends and learn about the school than it is to get top grades. Remember that mastering a new culture, a new language, new friendship patterns, and a new educational system are forms of learning. These may be more important life lessons than the math, science or history facts in the classroom.
- (4) Help your children make friends. This is not simply so that your children will have more fun. Children who have problems with friends are more likely to have problems with school learning, problems with adults, and problems later in life. Children do not need lots of friends-some like big groups, some like having just one close friend. What is important is that they learn to share, cooperate, be kind, and feel accepted. You may need to take the initiative and invite another child or another family to come to your home or do an activity together.
- (5) Be proud of your children. Children are accomplishing many major tasks in the early days. They may be learning a new language as well as new educational goals and methods. And yet they soon acclimate academically, make friends, and play ball alongside the others. Children are resilient, flexible, and creative. They will use these skills more easily if they feel your support and pride.

This article is adapted from a new book, *Understanding American Schools: The Answers to Newcomers' Most Frequently Asked Questions*, by Anne P. Copeland and Georgia Bennett (available from <http://www.interchangeinstitute.org>). *Reprinted with Permission from BR Anchor Publishing, Jacksonville, FL. Contact Amy Roman, Publisher at aroman@branchor.com or 904.641.1140. See BR Anchor Publishing's books at www.branchor.com*