

# How to prepare your child for moving to a new house



Think of the biggest change you experienced as a child. Then imagine being adopted into a new, forever family from another country. In an instant our sons lost everything they knew and gained a new family, a new name, a new language, a new home, a new country—a new world.

Now we're changing their world again. We're moving out of the home they love. Our sons are confused and upset.

The other night Leo realized a toy he hadn't played with in months was in storage, and he started sobbing. I didn't need to be a psychologist to know that the tears weren't over the toy.

If there's one thing we learned in our parenting training when we were waiting to adopt, it was that when you can't handle things yourself, you should ask for professional help.

So, since I work at Loyola University Maryland, I turned to the Loyola Clinical Centers for help. I was just hoping for a few ideas, but La Keita Carter, Psy.D., director of the behavioral health and assessment services—and a mother of two young boys—gave me a whole new perspective.

Here are her tips:

## **When speaking with your child:**

**1. Explain the move in kid-friendly language.** Even using the word “moving” can be confusing. Instead, use words the child knows and tell him, “We’re going to a new house” or “We’re changing houses.”

**2. Put the move in the context of the child's life.** Think of another change they have experienced, and talk about it. Say, “Do you remember when you went from day care to this other school and it had different people and a different classroom, but some things were the same? We’re going to go to a different place, but some of the stuff is going to be the same. You’re going to have a kitchen and a bathroom, and you’re going to take your toothbrush.”

**3. Make the move an adventure.** Talk up the positive sides of moving, how your child will be able to make her bedroom her favorite color, how there will be more room to play. Speak to the child's emotions. “Daddy will get home from work earlier.” “We won’t drive as much every day.” “We’ll be closer to Grandma’s house.”

**4. Don't take your children to see many prospective houses.** "It depends on the personality, but it could very much overwhelm your children," Carter said. "They could also get attached to certain parts of the house."

**5. Be careful not to over-promise what the new house will offer.** A child will look for those features immediately upon moving in, while you might be thinking of adding them down the road. "Don't promise a huge swing set. You might move in during the winter, when that might not be something on your priority list."

**6. Making the new house sound big can be frightening to a child.** You can tell your child she'll have more room in the new house without making her worry that she could get lost in a huge yard.

**7. Ask your children for their reactions to the move in a very organic way.** Tell them, "A caterpillar is going to change into a butterfly. It'll be prettier. It'll be nicer. You'll have your own room. You'll have a playroom." Children might tire of the conversation, but parents should look for their reactions—negative and positive—so they can really understand what a child is thinking.

**8. Talk with them about their favorite parts of their current home so you can find out what they'll miss.**

**9. Transplant pieces of your child's room.** Try to replicate a part of your child's room in the new house. When Carter moved her older son to his big-boy bedroom, for example, she moved a collage from his nursery to his new room.



*La Keita Carter's son's collage / Courtesy of La Keita Carter*

### **During the actual move:**

**1. Make the child's room a priority during move-in.** Put the furniture in the children's bedrooms even before they see them. Then they will feel more at home from the beginning.

**2. Let your children have some control in decorating their bedrooms.** Consider letting them pick the color for their bedroom walls. You can even make it a game, painting three big squares on the wall and letting them pick one, or letting them make handprints on the wall to see how the color looks. You might let your child pick a new bed, wall decals such as *these*, or other décor.

**3. If the children want to help with packing, have them pack items they are not attached to.** For a child, seeing beloved possessions disappearing into boxes can be alarming.



*Helping Baba move a rake into storage*

**4. Keep in mind that seeing the old house empty of furniture could also be distressing to a child.** You may want to have him stay with friends or family during the moving day.

**Create lasting memories:**

**1. Invite your child to draw a picture of the house they are leaving.**

**2. Find something obscure that's a physical part of the house to take—a piece of carpet from their bedroom, for example.** And think creatively about what you could take. Carter recalled how her cousin went to her grandparents' house—now an abandoned home in Baltimore City—and pulled the address numbers off the house to give it to her aunt as a Christmas present.

**3. Leave a piece of yourselves behind.** “Find an obscure place where you can leave a piece of your children, like their initials, in some sort of place where it won't be seen—like a baseboard of a closet.”

**4. Celebrate the old house.** Tell your children you're going to celebrate the house you're moving out of and all the great memories you've had there. Make the celebration a last memory. Give them a chance to express themselves and share the reasons they love the house.

Tonight we talked about moving in a different way, discussing what we love about our house and what we'll miss. The boys are going to love having a party for the house. And John and I will keep trying to figure out how to make this less stressful for our sons—and maybe even ourselves.



*The best part of the move so far has been riding the cart at the storage facility. What have you done to help your children with a move? I'd love to hear!*