When your child's friend moves away

This sign now sits on my friend's lawn. I still remember four years ago when I pulled my big blue minivan up in front of their house after the moving van left. A mommy sat on the stoop with her children. "How old are they? I hollered out. The ages of the children matched my children's and I was delighted. Indeed they became good friends. And now, there's the "For Sale" sign.

It's the end of the school year, and "For Sale" signs dot lawns all over the United States. Chances are, one of them belongs to your child's friend. Just as the child who moves will have to adjust to a new environment, your child will have to adjust to a world without a friend who was part of his daily routine.

Much has been written about how to transition the child who moves into a new environment, but how can you help your child when his close friend moves away?

Your child may experience a sense of loss and feel that he was "left behind." Some children perseverate over the new hole in their world. Others take the change in stride.

In the late 1960's, psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross described "the five stages of grief." The stages were initially applied to people suffering from terminal illness,

but later they were applied to any type of deep loss such as your child's friend moving. The first stage is denial: "I don't believe he moved." Anger follows in the second stage: "Why me? That's not fair!" Your child may then transition into the third stage and bargain: "If I'm good maybe he will hate it there and come back." The fourth stage is sadness: " I really miss my friend," or, "Why make friends when they end up moving away?" The final stage is acceptance: "Everything is going to be okay. We will remain friends even if he doesn't live here."

Some pass through all stages quickly and some skip stages altogether. The process is personal and chastising your child to "just get over it" will not expedite the process. However, there are ways to smooth the journey:

· Reassure your child that feeling sad or angry is common. Parents need to know that sad children may not show obvious signs of sadness such as crying. Instead, rocky sleep patterns, alterations in eating, disinterest in activities or a drop in the quality of school work can be signs that a child feels sad. If feelings of depression in your child last more than a month or if your child shows a desire to hurt himself, consult your child's health care provider.

· When you discuss the move with your child, keep in mind your child's developmental stage. For instance, preschool children are concrete and tend to be okay with things being "out of sight, out of mind." Talking endlessly about the move only conveys to the child that something is wrong. Children around third or fourth grade can take the move hard. They are old enough to feel loss, yet not old enough to understand that friendships can transcend distance. For teens, who are heavily influenced by their peers, a friend's moving away can cause a great deal of disruption. Acknowledge the negative emotions and reassure your child that each day will get better. Reassure him that despite the distance, he is still friends with the child who moved.

· Prior to the move, don’t be surprised if arguments break out between the friends. Anger can be a self defense mechanism employed subconsciously to substitute for sadness.

· Set a reunion time. Plan a vacation with the family who moved or plan a trip to their new home.

· After the move, send a care package and write/ help write a letter with your child.

· Answer a question with a question when you are not sure what a child wants to know. For example if he asks,” Will we always be friends?” Counter with “What do you think will happen?”

· Share stories about how you coped with a best friend moving when you were a child.

Social media and texting can be ways for older kids to stay in touch with a friend who moves away. Be sure to monitor your child, however, because too much time texting, skyping, and posting takes away from time your child needs to spend acclimating to a new routine.

As for my children, when I told one of my kids that I will sign her up for soccer, she squealed with delight, “Oh, that’s the league Kelly belongs to.”

My heart sank. I said as gently as I could, “She’s moving- she won’t be here for soccer season.”

And so we begin the process…

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