

TRANSITIONING CHURCHES:

7 Ways To Guide Children Gracefully



By Lora Helton



1 Age-Appropriate Communication

Children process information differently at different ages. When you are considering leaving a church, it is vital to share information in age-appropriate detail and language. The older your children, the more information they will want and need. It is very important to pray for discernment and wisdom as you navigate necessary conversations. Communication helps your kids prepare and plan for leaving, which also helps them with the transition.

2 Specific Communication

Sometimes the decision to leave a church is rooted in general ideas, such as the feeling that God is transitioning your family into a new season. If that is the case, keep in mind that it may be harder for kids to understand. In other cases, there are specific reasons for leaving a church. As you transition, keep the discussion limited to the particular issues. For example, if the change is related to theology, explain in age-appropriate ways what you believe and why you feel led to seek a new church home.

Unfortunately, sometimes leaving is hurtful and personal. In this case, try to keep the communication about personal issues to a minimum (or not at all with younger children). If your kids are teenagers, speak in respectful ways about the people involved and share the situation in very general terms. These transitions can be painful, and they have the potential to impact a teenager's view of the church negatively. Use this opportunity to teach your kids that people are human and imperfect, and that's why their eyes need to be on Jesus, the only perfect One.

3 Provide Moments of Closure

During a season of change, model to your children how to leave a place and end well. Tangibly express this growth mindset by intentionally creating moments that allow your kids to experience closure in their relationships.

If there are people who you wish to thank for opportunities while at the church, invite them to dinner or meet up for coffee. Your kids, depending upon the age, may need moments to say goodbye. Try to squeeze those moments in before you leave.



In the Transition

4 Awareness of Attitude

Our attitude is a reflection of how we are feeling and thinking in any given situation. Throughout a church transition, it is essential to model a good attitude for your children. Although change is hard and often involves loss, it can be positive when you consider the blessings that change can bring. Being aware of the losses and communicating about the transition makes a big difference in your attitude.

5 Empathy

Asking your kids about their feelings—and acknowledging your feelings—is very healthy. At times, your kids may be angry or even sad. By opening up and sharing that you feel sadness, too, you give your child a meaningful gift. Talking about the situation and the related feelings helps everyone move toward eventual acceptance of the new situation.

When you empathize with your kids, you allow them to feel heard and validated. You can teach them to trust God in the journey, and reassure them that He is using this transition as part of your story.

6 Patience & Time

The transition to a new place takes time for every family member. As a parent, you may feel sad, disconnected, and lonely for a season. Your kids may feel sad, disconnected, and lonely, too. When everyone experiences change at the same time, you need the patience to navigate the process.

The transition to a new church can be especially hard for minister's kids. Our family had been at a church for eleven years. It was where our four kids grew up. They had a sense of belonging and connection as the pastor's kids. When we transitioned from that church to another church in town, the new position did not include serving on the staff for a season.

Our son, who was in seventh grade at the time, found it hard to be unknown—unlike the experience in our previous church. He understood there had been a positive benefit to being a pastor's kid and being known in a good way. He was very hesitant to be involved in the new youth group.

As parents, we wanted to be understanding and patient, but at the same time, encourage him to try it. Despite his best efforts, he didn't feel connected. We had to let go of what we thought was best for him, which would have been to get involved with the new youth group.

For some kids, hopping into a new student ministry might come easily and be a good experience. But for our son—and his 9th-grade sibling—it was better to stay connected at the former church for a season. They wanted to remain with their small group where they experienced belonging and connection with trusted adult leaders. Their relationship with Christ's followers was more important than trying to force them to start over in a new church. We decided to offer grace, patience, and time with the transition.

7 Connections

Help your kids make connections in their new location. Help them get involved with their age group or connect with other parents who have kids their age. As ministers, we can be so busy with volunteers and staff that we do not spend extra-curricular time with parents who are peers.

After the Transition



To help your kids transition well, look for ways to build those connections. If you have early elementary age children, schedule a play date at a local park, zoo, or bounce house. If you have teenagers, plan an outing to a movie, escape game, water park, or local theme park. You can help your kids connect well and quickly by arranging some get-togethers with other parents of kids the same age.

Another way to help their connection is by being intentional to meet their new teachers or leaders. That way, the teachers can put a face with a name and be aware of the transition your child is experiencing.

I believe we can teach our kids to handle change and transition well. There are good parts, and there are hard parts, but most of all, there are comforting truths to learn. We can trust that God loves us and cares for us, even if we are struggling with sadness, loss, patience, and understanding. God is able and willing to use everything for good (Romans 8:28).

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