Where You Are

S7 Episode 4 - Re-Release No Shortage of Questions: Helping Kids Cope with Big Life Changes

TRANSCRIPT:

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Life is just a series of change. And as a parent or caregiver, as soon as you think you have one thing figured out, well then it changes again. And now you have to learn it, right? It's a constant process of evolution. So kids are going to have to experience changes and transitions, and that's just part of it. So it's great when they get to go through it with you because they're learning and they're learning with support, and that in and of itself will prepare them more so to do it when they're older.

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Char: This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Char Black.

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Bryn: And I'm Bryn Askwith. Every season we like to take an episode to answer some parent questions that we get at the Kelty Centre. This season, we've decided to put together three bite sized episodes of Where You Are to explore a few key topics that we get recurring questions on to help us answer these questions. We're joined by child psychiatrist and family therapist, Dr. Ashley Miller

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Char: For this mini-sode we'll talk about how to best support your child through transitions and big life changes like starting a new school, moving, or the arrival of a new sibling. Let's get into that conversation.

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Bryn: Back with us today, behind the mic is Dr. Ashley Miller, BC Children's Hospital, child psychiatrist, and family therapist. Hello again, and welcome back to Where You Are.

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Hello.

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Bryn: Dr. Miller. Changes and transitions are a part of life. We know this as parents and caregivers, but we don't always know how to support our kids through these big changes in life transitions such as starting a new school, moving, the arrival of a new sibling, maybe loss of a friendship, or loss of a loved one. But before we get to tips on how parents can manage this,

can you start us off by explaining what is it about transitions and big life changes that can be hard for kids, and what impacts that can have on their mental health?

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Everyone's a bit different with this. Some people just love adventure and they're curious by temperament. It's not a big deal, they just roll with it. Other people really like things to be the same, and this trait tends to be pretty stable throughout life. So I would say there's lots of adults who like things to be just the same and a lot of advanced notice, just like there's other adults who love being surprised and kids are no different.

So I think the first thing is just knowing that it's a temperamental trait. There's not a ton you can do about that. In terms of what makes it hard. So if you are on the side where change is a little difficult, yeah, humans are creatures of habit. We do love routine. It helps to prevent anxiety. Our brains are overwhelmed with so many choices. I mean, if you think about how humans have evolved over centuries, the choices now are just extreme. And so if you think of a school- aged kid who has to pick out what to wear on the first day of school, I mean that is a huge, huge deal compared to just you wear your one of two pairs of pants for your school uniform. What to have for lunch is a whole other one, let alone going to a fully new school. So we have to put it in perspective that these things are not necessarily how humans have adapted. We've adapted to see the same thing is safe and different is scary.

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Bryn: I agree that for some kiddos you can see transitions and changes, they just roll with it. And so the reminder of that it's a personality trait is really helpful. And I know for my little kiddo, transitions can be a little overwhelming when he's outside of his routine. So it is something that a lot of parents have questions on. So I'm glad we're talking about it here today.

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Char: Thanks, Bryn. I'm the same as your kid. I love routine, and when Dr. Miller is talking about it, I'm like, I was there. I was like, that at birth. Let's move on to some strategies. Now, a lot of parents reach out to the Kelty Center asking what they can do to help their child cope with big life changes. For example, moving, which involves a new neighborhood, new school, and more, any tips for our listeners related to that?

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Yeah, again, it's great when parents can take the lead with this and make themselves as comfortable as possible first, because what you really want to have to help a child who's a little hesitant, is confidence. And it's hard to fake confidence, and you don't have to be perfect about it, and you don't have to be fully sure, but enough because if you're really doubtful, hesitant, certainly if you're expressing that to your child, they're looking to you for indications of how safe and how good this new thing is going to be.

So as best you can, talking to other adults about your worries, your doubts, your fears, so that by the time it comes to the child, it's not that you shouldn't share any of those, but you're sharing

them in a measured way. And most of all, you're expressing confidence in the decision and in the child's capacity to cope. So that's kind of number one.

And then for those of us who aren't keen on new things, the principle is gradual exposure. So little bite size pieces of getting to know the new place if possible, tends to help. They throw you into the pool and learn how to swim does work for some kids, but others can be just totally overwhelming. So if you have a more sensitive kid, first, maybe going to the new neighborhood and just driving around or biking around, then going and seeing the house and also emphasizing all the good things about it, kids will transition into a new home much more easily when the advantages are really brought to the fore. So maybe they get a bigger room, maybe they get their own room, maybe they have a smaller room, but they get a new lamp. Something that is exciting because motivation is like this balance between the reward and the cost. And if the reward is higher than the cost, and if we can focus on it, then we'll be positively motivated to go towards that new experience. So, we don't want to deny that there are bad parts, and we certainly want to talk to the child about their previous home, their previous life, help them miss it, grieve it, and also talk about the pros of the new role that they're going to be in.

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Char: Great. Thanks for those tips. Dr. Miller. I really liked how you talked about the pros. I definitely did that with my son in transitioning into a new school. I said it would be the best time of his life, and I think he believed it because the transition went smoothly. So I'm hoping my efforts paid off.

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Dr. Ashley Miller: I'm sure they did.

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Bryn: I had a similar scenario around moving. Our family move not too long ago and doing things in bite-sized ways seemed to help with the transition, and then kind of grieving the things that you will miss. I remember being at our house before we moved, and we loved the sunsets from the bedroom balcony that we used to watch together. So we literally in our last week together sat and looked at as many as we could, and we even had s'mores on the balcony, and things like that just to kind of enjoy it and really savor the moments together. And then when we first moved to the new house, I remember thinking as I saw a sunset from our new window, I was like, "Oh, I don't know if it's the same." And my little guy said, " Oh, maybe we need to have some s'mores." And I was like, "Oh, maybe that's missing." Yeah, so it is interesting to see how kids take things in with you. But yeah, that idea of kind of grieving it and that's a normal part of the process and then highlighting some of the great new things that are coming too, can really make a difference to the transition into life changes.

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Yeah, that's such a great story, Bryn, because the allowing mixed feelings is so key whenever there's a transition. So having a new sibling, sometimes parents of course are, they're excited, but they really want to cheerlead that one and say, " Oh, it's going to be great.

You're going to be the best big brother." And then when the little four- year old is suddenly disappointed not to get to sit so easily on mom or dad's lap, you know, Don't love your brother?" I mean, we all say that, but really there's part of you that doesn't really love your little brother right then, it's a loss. It's a loss of that time that's all yours. And I, it's so important to be able to acknowledge both sides of the coin.

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Bryn: So true. And Dr. Miller, having worked with a number of families, in your experience, how does giving your kids skills around managing transitions and big life changes help them over the long term?

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Dr. Ashley Miller: Well, I think, like you said at the beginning, life is just a series of change. And everyone knows this as a parent or caregiver, as soon as you think you have one thing figured out, well then it changes again. And now you have to learn it, right? It's a constant process of evolution. So yeah, kids are going to have to experience changes and transitions, and that's just part of it. So it's great when they get to go through it with you because they're learning, and they're learning with support, and that in and of itself will prepare them more so to do it when they're older. If you have the same house and school and everything from K- 12, that's also no big deal because I'm sure there's smaller changes that happen day to day in there, and they'll be that big one anyway at the end of grade 12, and hopefully parents can be there to help navigate that one. That's the one I'm doing right now. And just all kinds of learning opportunities. So it's always coming up.

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Char: That makes me laugh because I'm always overconfident. I always feel like I have it figured out. But within the next week, I feel like I a novice now, again, am a expert from a novice in within 24 hours so- Dr. Miller, do you have any final thoughts or words of wisdom for our listeners?

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Dr. Ashley Miller: I think the idea of just going through change together and maybe one of the hardest changes to go through together as families is when kids become teenagers, we don't necessarily notice it because it doesn't happen from one day to the next. But also recognizing that there's some loss in that one for parents losing the little kid who was so cuddly and just saw their parent as the best thing on earth to the surly person in their room speaking in mono syllables. And it's also a big change for kids, because their job at that age is to figure out how to be more independent. And sometimes that involves a lot of pushing back, but they're also losing a bit of that innocence of childhood and having to deal with more adult- like responsibilities. So just to highlight that transition of becoming an adolescent is a big one. So I really encourage everyone to read about adolescence a little bit. There's some great books out there and can take a look on the Kelty Mental Health website, I'm sure for some suggestions, but to really give ourselves a lot of compassion at that time because it's hard on parents and on kids.

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Char: Great. Thank you, Dr. Miller for those words of wisdom. And thank you so much to our listeners and for Dr. Miller to join us today on this mini- sode.

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Dr. Ashley Miller: It's really a pleasure speaking with you both.

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Bryn: Thank you. You can find any of the resources mentioned in today's episode in our show notes. And personally I'd like to plug Dr. Miller and Adela Frost's book, What to Say to Kids When Nothing Seems to Work. I found it really helpful with my kids at this age and stage. And if you're looking for more resources on child and youth mental health and wellness, head to our website, keltymentalhealth.ca, or you'll find videos, webinar recordings, toolkits, and more for parents and caregivers.

Char's it been fantastic co-hosting this mini episode with you. And thanks to our Where You Are listeners, glad you tuned in with us today.

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Char: Thanks, Bryn. I've had fun doing these mini-sodes as well. This episode of Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's, Kelty Mental Health Resource Center. Our show is produced and edited by Emily Morantz with audio engineering by Sam Seget, audio production by Jar Audio. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a rating wherever you might be listening now.

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Bryn: Looking for more great episodes of Where You Are? Find us wherever you listen to podcasts, and of course, at keltymentalhealth.ca/podcast. We hope you'll make us your go- to resource to promote your family's mental health and wellness from where you are to where you want to be.