

New to school: How to help your kid handle being the fresh face in the hall

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Shea Gibbs

<http://www.c-ville.com/autho>

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Wendy Fisher was forever the new kid. Twelve times she started at a different elementary school. Twelve times she had to figure out how to fit in. She got pretty good at it.

“As a kid and as a family, the best thing to do is to join something,” she said. “Join a team, the drama club, anything you can do to shrink your circle of acquaintances.”

Now, as head of Charlottesville’s Mountaintop Montessori, Fisher sees a lot of new kids. And she’s not

the only one. In a university town like Charlottesville, it's especially common to have students moving in and moving away.

"I think it is important for everyone to acknowledge it is hard," Fisher said. "As parents and educators, we like to say, 'You'll be fine, you'll be fine,' but it is a worry. The people around the new kid should take steps to make it an easier entrance."

So what are those steps? If you're lucky enough to make your move when your child is young, you probably won't have to worry much about it. According to Albemarle County Schools guidance counselor Ashley Johnson, younger children think of everyone as a friend and welcome the new kid with open arms. But parents with older kids may have more trouble. First, to the extent you can control the timing of a move, it's best to introduce kids to a new school at the beginning of the year.

"When you get a new student in the middle of the year, it's hard on the kid and hard for the teacher and the rest of the kids in the class. We've already established our routine," said Adam Mohr, a third grade teacher at Agnor Hurt Elementary School.

Routine, according to Mohr, is critical—at home or at school. By making sure things happen on a regular schedule with no surprises, you can minimize the stress of a new situation.

"Try to mimic the routine of school at home," Mohr said. "Whether your kids are saying anything or not, the mercury is rising, and they feel stressed."

Fisher agrees school and home life have got to work together for the transition to a new place to go smoothly. That can be easier in Charlottesville, where you run into people you know at every corner, but it can also be out of some parents' comfort zones.

"I have to force myself to be outgoing because I am so shy," Fisher said. "The parent has to get past that and make the way for the child. Take those hard first steps,

get the class list and make those new relationships.”

Communicating with your child’s school is also key, according to Mohr. A lot of new kids act out as a defense mechanism or to gain attention. But you’ll never know what’s going on if you don’t engage the “triad” of communication between yourself, your child, and your child’s teacher, he said.

Fortunately, it’s not all on you to make your family’s transition to a new place seamless. The community and school system can play a big role. Mohr said when students that need extra attention leave his school, he’ll reach out to the next institution to tell them what to expect. And when new kids arrive, he’ll sometimes encourage his more “non-judgmental” students to take them under their wing. For the most part, though, he just tries to set a good example for his classroom.

“My job as the teacher is to not make a big deal out of it. The kids are the ones that are all like, ‘We’re getting a new kid!’” he said. “I keep it really low key. A calm teacher has a calm classroom.”

Most schools will have a formalized program in place that helps socialize new and existing kids alike. Albemarle County schools, for example, practice the “Responsive Classroom,” which gives students a weekly open forum to talk about what’s going on with them. It’s a chance to give kids a voice in a safe environment and make them feel more in control.

Johnson said at Agnor Hurt, she also offers “friendship groups,” get-togethers specifically designed for children who have more difficulty making friends than others. While not every school in the city or county will have those types of programs, almost all guidance counselors are equipped to deal with tricky social situations, so it’s a good idea to seek them out when your son or daughter goes to a new school.

Johnson said most of the time, the new kids she deals with find a group of friends—however small—in much less time than she anticipates.

“Kids say they don’t have any friends when they aren’t

friends with everybody,” she said. “But I do think there is a kid out there for everybody.”