

kids decoded

Confused? Sleep deprived? At your wit's end? **Liza Finlay** answers your parenting questions and sets everything straight.

Dear Liza,

My six-year-old daughter has trouble coping with change. When she started Grade 1 last fall I felt like I was living with a toddler again: she'd have complete meltdowns if I packed apple juice instead of orange! We're contemplating a move from one neighbourhood school to another (the new one has a French-immersion program). I'd like this transition to happen without so much drama. Help! —Vivian, Kamloops, B.C.

Dear Vivian,

Mark Twain once said: "Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear—not absence of fear." What's that got to do with you? Well, it helps to keep in mind that your job is not to transform your daughter into a fearless, risk-taking, lover-of-all-things-new, but rather to give your daughter tools to surmount her fears.

So, start by telling your daughter that all of us feel afraid sometimes. She's not alone. Next, show her how to allay her anxiety with some homework. Visit the school ahead of time, introduce your daughter to her new teacher, set up a play-date with another child in her class. In short, short-circuit the fear fuse.

Finally, put some of the control back in your child's hands. (Remember, dicey weather conditions are harder on the passenger than the driver, so let her steer as much as possible.) Attending this new school may not be negotiable, but what is? Allow her to choose her outfit for the first day or decide if she'd like to eat lunch at school or at home.

And take heart. Your child is expressing her individuality. Some kids will always be more fearful of change than others and that's just one of the things that makes them unique.

Dear Liza,

I'm expecting a new baby this month and I feel my life would be easier if I could get my two-year-old off the bottle before his little brother or sister arrives. What's the best approach? Should I just make him quit cold turkey and live with the ensuing misery, or is there a kinder way? — Gillian, Toronto

Dear Gillian,

First, are you sure you want to do this? Rest assured that your son, like every other Canadian teen, will have given up his bottle long before he reaches high school. I sometimes wonder if, in fits of maternal hyper-vigilance, we manufacture problems before they exist. I mean, would it be so bad to have two on the bottle?

If, however, the bottle-sucking is keeping him—and, therefore, you—up at night, or you're driving the mini-van off the road while retrieving "suck sucks" that have become wedged in the wheel well, maybe you do have a problem.

According to Alyson Schafer, parenting coach and author of *Breaking the Good Mom Myth* (John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd.), there are a couple of things you can do to take some of the



Whether it's moving to a new home or a new school, change can be tough on little ones. Here's how to help them with the heavy lifting.

misery out of the cold-turkey approach.

First, change what's in the bottle. Your child will likely choose warm milk in a sippy cup over cold water in his beloved bottle.

Next, warn him. No one likes to have plans sprung on them and kids are no exception. "Explaining to your toddler that his bottle is disrupting the family and then counting down the days to BFD—Bottle-Free Day—allows him time to prepare," says Schafer. "It's also respectful, and treating him with respect will help avoid a power struggle over 'bubba.'"

Last, give him some choices. He may have to live without his bottle, but what else could he cuddle to soothe himself? Ask him. He may just answer you.

Liza Finlay is a Toronto writer and mother of six-year-old Liam and two-year-old Finn. Visit her at lizafinlay.com.

Got a question for Liza? Write to letters@familyoutlookmail.com or send queries via regular mail to Family Outlook, c/o Dear Liza, 37 Front Street East, Toronto, Ont., M5E 1B3.

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How soon is too soon when it comes to kindergarten? How do you help a child grieve for a cherished grandparent?

Liza Finlay has some ideas.

Dear Liza,

My daughter is scheduled to start junior kindergarten this fall, but I have concerns. Not only will she be the youngest in her class, but she's also a naturally cautious, shy child. Her current preschool teacher is worried she won't be ready. I really want to build her confidence, but does that mean pushing her or pulling her out? —Sara, via e-mail

Dear Sara,

You see the solution in pushing or pulling your “shy” child. How about reframing that as encouraging and coaching instead?

“Pushing” and “pulling” makes you sound frustrated, and if she catches a whiff of that discontent, your contemplative youngster will have found a button she can push with you. Oh, and one other bit of housekeeping: according to Toronto parenting coach Beverley Cathcart-Ross, you should be careful about pinning labels like “the shy girl” on your daughter. Kids will assume whatever role they see gains attention; if your daughter latches onto that “shy” branding, she's likely to use it as a crutch throughout her life.

Now, on to the business at hand—namely, encouraging your daughter to develop the social skills she needs to excel at school. And, make no mistake, budding social skills are precisely what kindergarten-readiness is built upon. The good news, says Cathcart-Ross, is that social skills—sitting in a group, interacting with others, speaking up, beginning to resolve conflicts—can be taught. “It's important that Sara encourage her daughter to think and act independently,” says Cathcart-Ross. “Let her choose her own clothes, pour her own cereal, do up

her own seatbelt. And when she requests guidance or permission—‘May I have a snack, Mom?’—ask for her opinion. ‘What would make a healthy snack?’ This will build her self-confidence.” Cathcart-Ross adds that becoming a household in which mistakes are viewed as a healthy part of human growth will demonstrate that risks are often worth taking. So go ahead and register her, prepare her, and know that none of this is irreversible. If kindergarten becomes too difficult, there's no harm stopping midterm and trying again next year.

Dear Liza,

My husband recently lost his mother. I think we are all coping well, with the exception of our 12-year-old daughter who can't stop crying and, even when she does, seems lost inside herself. How can I help her grieve for her grandmother and move on? —Alexandra, Toronto

Dear Alexandra,

Is it possible your daughter is, in fact, coping well? Says Dr. Sandra Bertman, a Boston-based grief counsellor: “Tears are a totally appropriate way of mourning the loss of a life, but,” she adds, “it is important to remember that death ends a life, it

doesn't end a relationship.”

Commemorating her grandmother's life and spirit will help your child keep alive what is clearly a strong bond, and it will remind your daughter that nothing, not even death, can erase beloved memories and special teachings.

Have her create a collage of photos or a treasure box filled with cherished mementoes. Encourage her to talk about what she's feeling as she flips through them all. “Don't assume you know,” says Bertman. “She could be feeling any number of emotions at a given time and that's all OK. Anger is OK, sadness is OK and tears are really OK.” So keep the tears flowing—they are a very real reminder of a very great love.

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Don't let your little one get too comfortable with this “shy guy” role—it could stick.