



THE GROWING BRAIN

Episode 5: How to Help Children Manage Big Changes

Guest: Karen Dumas

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Children moving to new homes, switching schools, dealing with a parent's divorce... learn strategies for helping children manage these important moments in their lives.

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. This podcast is produced by Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to social emotional health for kids, families, adults, and communities. This first season of The Growing Brain is dedicated to parents. We will explore the joys, challenges and mysteries of parenthood through the lens of social emotional health. In this series, we'll shed light on topics such as how kids' brains work and healthy discipline, all better equipping parents to grow healthy brains. I'm your host, Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute.

Maureen *Welcome back to the growing brain podcast. I'm so excited to be here today with Karen Dumas. Karen is a licensed professional counselor and a registered play therapist on our therapeutic services team, where she works directly with kids and families at Momentous Institute. Thank you so much for being here, Karen.*

Karen *Thank you for having me.*

Maureen *Today we are talking about changes. This is one we get asked about a lot, like, um, my kid's moving to a new school and how do I help them with that change? Or, you know, different changes like that, that kids experience that we know have an impact on their emotional health. So I'm so glad you're here to help us talk through this and... let's get started.*

I wanted to ask you some... what are some of the changes that we should be paying attention to with kids?

Karen *Well, I think it's a great topic because I see that a lot in the kids that I see for therapy, um, kids starting a new school or having to change schools, or changes in the family like divorce, separation, loss of a loved one. So there's lots of different changes that come up that I think we don't understand the impact that it has on kids. Um, so I think it's a great topic.*

Maureen *Yeah. Yeah. Great. So, so what types of behaviors... and of course, every child is different and every change has different impact on different kids... but what are some common behaviors that we see when kids are going through these life changes?*

Karen Well, I think the first thing is to know that, um, you can see, uh, symptoms right away and I'll talk about those, but you could also not see anything for a little bit. Um, sometimes when we have a big change, it's kind of like us as adults, there may be kind of in shock or taking it all in. So you might not, um, see anything at first, like after a loss of a loved one, sometimes parents will say, I don't... I'm not seeing anything. They're just acting totally normal. And it's kind of like us, they're just, they're going through their own processes too of, you know, what, how they're feeling about that change. So there's that part.

Um, but then the symptoms that you may see, um, depending on ages, I think one that you can see with younger kids is regression. So anything that they may have mastered, um, potty training, they quit sucking their thumb or wetting the bed at night. Um, you might see some regression with some of those symptoms and that's normal.

Maureen *And that's important to hear, because I think a lot of people probably think something's wrong with my kid. They were totally potty trained and now they're not.*

Karen Absolutely. Yeah.

Maureen *Um, and then what about some of those behaviors that... let's talk about those kids who don't exhibit any behavior right away, and then later... uh, is it later you might see that their grades are slipping or they're acting different? Give us a little more context around those kids.*

Karen Absolutely. So some of the behaviors that you might see is, um, it could be, um, where they're acting out. So maybe getting in trouble more at home with you guys as the parents, or at school. Or, um, being a little bit more irritable with their friends or family. Or you could see the opposite. Um, and that's, you know, maybe withdrawing or like stopping doing things that they maybe had, um, enjoyed before. But now, they would rather kind of stay... stick with you. Um, separation anxiety is a big one too. So, um, any time that they maybe have to be away from those that they know and are comfortable and safe with, you know, they may have, you may see them exhibit a little bit more, um, anxiety with having to separate from you because of the changes that are going on.

Maureen *Yeah. Yeah. So I think there are, there are really two kinds of changes. They're the kinds we can prepare for, that we know are coming, like you're moving to a new school, or even we're getting divorced. And then there are the kind that you can't prepare for. So we'll talk about those later, but let's talk about the ones you can prepare for. When you know that your child is going to go through a change, what are some things that parents should be thinking about? And some things that parents can do to help their kids?*

Karen Great question. I think, um, a lot of times we forget that, um, kids, even if they're four or five, six years old, they do better with information just like adults. Um, not necessarily having to give every single detail to kids, cause you want to, um, give

information on their level, on their developmental level. But, um, I think it's important to give them some facts, you know, about the changes that are coming up so that they, um, don't, you know, their, their brains are very, um, they can be very imaginative and, and so they can create all kinds of things that maybe necessarily would cause some anxiety, but aren't really true. So I think giving them some information on their level is really important.

Maureen *That makes me think of how, uh, there's so much that we as adults understand about the world. We have so much more context than kids do, and this is, this isn't about change, but it's an example of what you're talking about. The first time I took my son on an airplane, he was a toddler and I was thinking, he, you know, he's a curious kid so he was asking some questions about what's it going to be like. AAnd as I was explaining it to him, I thought, oh my gosh, he has no idea any of these concepts. Like I understand we get in lines because lines are the most efficient way to move people through large groups of people through small area. And we take our shoes off because there's the threat of shoe bombs, right? Like there's so much context I have that he just doesn't understand. He shows up at the airport and it's a giant room with millions of people in it, you know? So, um, that first time we flew on the airplane, I started sort of explaining it to him like, okay, first, you know, grandpa's going to drop us off and we're going to get out of the car and we're going to walk in. It's a big room. Then we're going to stand in a line. And we're going to go through security. And what that means is that we're going to have to do this, put our bag on the thing and take our shoes off. And then we're going to have to sit... and just giving him all that detail, I mean, it was exhaustive. But when I... he's the kind of kid who liked that... so when I gave it to him, it means he was totally satisfied and he understood. And then when we were sitting there waiting for the airplane, and you know, there's like an hour where you're just sitting there at the gate waiting and he totally understood it. It was not the like now what, when... what's next? When are we going to...? I said, this is the part I told you about where we have to wait a really long time. Remember I told you we're going to have to sit and wait a really long time? And he was like, yeah, I remember that. And so I could see that, of course, traveling on an airplane is not the same thing as parents going through divorce or moving, but the same concept applies here where you... kids just, they don't have all of the context that adults have in the world.*

Karen Right. And I love that example because you're so right. I mean, think about what that experience must have been like if he didn't have any of that information, how scary could that be to have all these people and all these TSA agents who he doesn't know, they just are checking people and having to take off your shoes. What's this and how long it is to wait, and so to have some context and give him that, I think is oh, it's so important.

Maureen *And so the same thing I think probably could be true for the kind of changes we can prepare. So I've... we've mentioned this a couple of times but a kid going to a new school. So let's, here's what it's going to look like on your first day of school, you're going to walk up the stairs. First thing you're going to do is this... here's the people you're going to meet... your classroom is going to look like this. I assume that depending on the age and the child, that, that level of prep that parents, I, I just don't*

think we think about needing that, like, I don't need that much context for myself, but they do.

Karen Sure. And you know, one just simple little you tip that you can do with them too, is just, um, you know, have them, if they like to draw, you know, like have them draw kind of like, you know, what they are most excited about or, you know, maybe what they're worried about. Um, you'd be surprised, you know, what comes out, um, of kind of what's in their minds about this new experience.

Maureen *That's good. Cause um, I think we probably make assumptions about what they're worried about and so maybe we're, uh, we might be attending to the wrong things?*

Karen Right. Yeah.

Maureen *Um, so let's talk about the changes that we can't prepare for. So, you know, you have to move suddenly because you know, whatever reason you, you can't stay in your house or there's damage or something, or, you know, the child's teacher quits or is let go or something, you know, there's no warning that they're getting a new teacher, those kinds of changes that just happen suddenly. How do you, how do you recommend the parents kind of handle those changes?*

Karen Um, again, I think it's not too farfetched from what adults need, you know, when they have changes that happen abruptly. Um, I think, uh, really kind of being there with your child and helping them feel heard and understood is so important. Um, you know, uh, whatever feeling they may have about it, whether it be, um, shocked or disappointed or upset or, you know, mad, you know, whatever that feeling is just kind of, um, letting them know that you, you, you get it that you, you understand it.

Maureen *And I think I hear you saying that, that, you know, it's possible that kids will have a different feeling than we have. So I might be, um, upset that we have to move and my kid might be excited.*

Karen Right.

Maureen *You know, it's possible that I'm saying that, and I don't want to project my feelings onto my child. So I think what you're saying is making sure that you're hearing their actual feelings and not assuming them, and also not putting your, maybe your anxieties or fears on them or even your excitement if they're anxious.*

Karen Right. Absolutely.

Maureen *Sometimes we see kids who are struggling with something and we didn't even think about it. We didn't even, it wasn't even on our radar to prepare them or to attend to their emotional needs after like, you know, we got a new car and didn't think that was a big deal. And now every time we go and get in the car, my kid is throwing a fit. Well, I didn't plan for their emotional needs around a new car, and I'm not really paying attention to their emotional needs around this new car, but they're having*

some emotional reaction to it. So, I, there are times when kids react to changes that we didn't even think about.

Karen Yeah, I think, and that can be hard to be that attuned all the time to know kind of how they're going to react. But I see that a lot where, you know, a parent might be telling about a, a story and, and like what sticks out to them is something that we would have never even thought of, you know? Um, or I, I hear this a lot too, uh, like, uh, a pet, not necessarily in your mind that was significant, like a fish or a turtle or something like that, but they hold onto that so much and then they start kind of acting out and then you find out, oh, it's pet turtle died, but it wasn't a big deal to you, but it was a huge deal to them. So I think even if you didn't notice it right at first, you know, it's still really important to kind of circle back and, and respond to kind of how they're feeling about that.

Maureen *And then there are times when the changes, um, don't affect us as parents emotionally, like pet turtle. I'm not having a reaction to that; my kid is. And then there are times when the changes are really personal for us too. So if I'm going through divorce, then I'm struggling with my own emotional, you know, issues surrounding that. And I'm also trying to attend to my kids' experiences. So what thoughts do you have about how parents can handle all of that at the same time?*

Karen Well, one – know, that, that's, that's tough. I mean, it's tough on any parent to, you know, be going through something that's so emotional and hard for yourself and for your family and at the same time trying to be present and there for your child, who's also experiencing it. I think the biggest, um, tip that I would say here is that it's so important to, um, allow yourself to be emotional or have those feelings. That shows that your child... that they can have those feelings too. You know, a lot of times as parents and, and for good reason, they think, oh, I'm going to kind of shut down or keep this closed off.

Maureen *Put on a strong face...*

Karen Yeah, put on a strong face so that my kid is not suffering, you know, but what that inadvertently does is it tells the child, they need to do that too. You know, and so, but if you allow yourself to kind of just be human, um, you know, and have those feelings of whatever it is, sadness or, um, you know, then allows the child to know that he can have those feelings too. And that it's okay.

I think the only thing that here that, you know, just to be aware us of is that if you get to a place that it's hard for you to kind of manage those emotions, you know, that maybe, you know, seeking help for yourself so that you can, you know, there's that kind of fine line of, you know, um, seeking help for yourself so that you can be there for your child, too.

Maureen *And speaking of seeking help, um, what are some indicators that can help you know, when is the right time for your child to seek help? So, you know, death in the family or divorce, some of those big, big ones, um, some things can be managed and some kids can manage those things. And sometimes, obviously kids might need*

professional help. So what are some indicators that can give parents a tip on when to go see a therapist?

Karen I, I think, um, time is one and I don't know that I have like a specific um, you know, timeline that I could give you, but I would say, you know, anything, you know, after a month, if you're still seeing, you know, um, symptoms of regression or acting out or being withdrawn, then I would definitely, you know, seek out professional help for those kids so that they can have just a little, you know, help in dealing with, with the, with the changes.

Maureen *Let's talk about older kids. I know developmentally older kids are starting to sort of lean into peer relationships and friendship relationships, and sort of lean away from parent and authority relationships. Um, and that can be hard for parents, uh, especially when something happens that the parents feel like they really want to support their child. What advice would you give to a parent whose, whose teenager is sort of getting support from a friend and really not coming to them at all?*

Karen Well, one – I would say that that's very normal, even if, um, you know, you kind of feel like they're shutting you out a little bit. Um, but I would say it's really good to let them know that the door's always open, you know, that they can come and talk to you or ask you questions. That you know, um, they may not be ready to at this time, but at least giving them that, um, opportunity if they, if they want to or need to, that they know that they can come to you.

Maureen *Now let's get a little deeper and let's talk about grief. So we're talking about those changes that are really significant—loss of a loved one or loss of uh, you know, situation like housing situation or something that is a significant change in the child's life. So let's talk a little bit about sort of that grief process and maybe how it looks for younger and older kids.*

Karen I think again, with, um, um, younger kids and even older kids, you might see some behavior change, you know, um, you might see some regression again, you might, um, see some, you know, getting in trouble more just, um, at home or at school. And so some of the same symptoms that we see with just with changes in general. I would say, um, with grief and loss though, with some kids, depending on, um, what it is. So for, um, death and dying, it's really important to kind of know developmentally where they are, because for, um, loss of a loved one, um, or a pet or something like that, a lot of little kids don't see that as permanent. And so they may not show the typical signs or symptoms that we think of, you know, like being upset or crying or grieving, kind of like you would think. Um, and so, um, you know, that's one, one area to know that, uh, it'll just take some time for kids. I mean, if you think about, um, you know, death is so abstract for us, you know, and where people go after they die, and so knowing that with kids, it's even way more abstract for them. And so with death and dying, I think it's important to use those words. Um, instead of, you know, they went to sleep or they passed away, um, because that can be so confusing. Um, so, you know, kids know that, you know, um, plants die, flowers die, you know, so they understand the concept on some level. So that's the reason why it's important, even though it's hard, I think, you know, to use those

words, but you know, granddad died versus granddad went to sleep, um, can be, you know, that's really important to differentiate between those two.

Maureen *That makes sense. And with older kids, uh, are there other considerations for older kids when talking about some of these harder concepts like death?*

Karen Um, I think again, just kind of looking out for ways that they may act out, you know, um, or other ways that they may try to fill that void. Um, so just really paying attention to kind of their, um, their mood, you know, and allowing for some of that, you know, of course, you know that there's going to be some changes as, you know, they may push you away or they may want to have you closer.

You know, one thing about, um, with, um, grief and loss too, is a lot of kids, um, will think that, and again, this, I think goes with any change, um, a lot of kids are egocentric and so they think the world revolves around them. So it's so important –

Maureen *Yeah. I've seen that. (Laughs.)*

Karen I'm sure every parent can agree with that. Um, so it's so important to let them know that that these changes or loss has nothing to do with them, you know?

Maureen *That's good. Yeah.*

Karen Yeah. Cause a lot of times they'll create this story, you know, that it's something I said or it's something I did. And so, so important to just talk to them and let them know this has nothing to do with anything you said or did.

Maureen *Um, yeah. That's so good. That's true for, like you said, all changes. I mean, that's so super true for things like divorce. Um, but even any, yeah, that's good. So we've talked about how to prepare our kids for changes. We've talked about unexpected changes. And then I just want to talk about things we can do outside of any change at all. So just in our general parenting, that can kind of help create some of that buffer, um, so that they're not hit as hard by changes and just so that we can be attuned to them a little better when changes do come. So do you have any thoughts about that?*

Karen Yeah, I think a good idea, um, for all families is when you can provide, cause I know we're so busy and just day-to-day life and you know, parents are working and have multiple children and you know, it's just very difficult to, um, find that time. But if you can just set aside 30 minutes once a week, um, for, for that child, for just you and your kid to have that uninterrupted time. You'll find out so much, you know, and I feel like that it also, you know, it's hard to be present all the time. It's hard to be attuned like you were talking about all the time. And so just having that 30 minutes set aside where, um, you and your child can be together, just playing, just connecting, whether it be through just free play or a game or taking a walk, making cookies. I mean, just whatever you can do. Um, and you'll find out so much. And it also adds to that kind of attention that kids seek from parents.

You know, when there's so much change going on, sometimes us as parents, we're kind of, um, absent sometimes too emotionally and physically for whatever reason. And so it really can build up that kind of one-on-one attention-seeking time, which will, like you said, act as a nice buffer, when things start to happen.

Maureen *Nice. So, so we're pretty much done here with, but I, I just want to end on a little bit lighter note. This has been a heavy topic and, and change is hard, but we know that through change, you know, that's where we grow. So, um, when we have these experiences and when our kids have these experiences, it can be hard in the moment, but it's helpful for us to think about it as building their resilience and helping them learn how to handle these kinds of changes that they'll inevitably have to face throughout their lives. Um, and I know that as a therapist, that's definitely something that you work with your families on. So do you have any closing... sort of closing thoughts about maybe the positive aspect of dealing with changes?*

Karen Yes. I think, you know, one of the things that I always tell my families whenever they come in and, you know, they're so upset, you know, telling me about whether, you know, it's a change for the whole family or just for their child. And I always let them know that, I always say that kids are so resilient. And they are, and I see it, um, they overcome and persevere through the, you know, the, the most difficult changes. And I think as long as they know that, um, they're being supported. And I, and also know that they're, they're also feeding off of you too. So, um, remember it's okay to show your emotion, but also, you know, they watch through your strength too. And so, um, you know, they, um, they do overcome these changes and, um, they can, I see them all the time, you know, process them in my play therapy room and whether it be through drawing or art or, you know, whatever, they, they really do kind of wrap their brains around it and, and feel more power and control. After, you know, being able to be heard and, and supported.

Maureen *All right, well, thank you so much. This conversation was so interesting and I appreciate you being here.*

Karen Thank you, Maureen, for having me.

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