

Making a your new place feel like home

Ten easy, quick and practical tips for making a new place really feel like home

By Chris Barnardo

Setting up a new place can be fun, but it is never easy, and it's made all the more difficult if you are leaving an established home behind. Here are ten practical tips for things you can do to speed up becoming established in your new home and help your kids to feel that they are

really involved in setting up your new place with you. As a dad you can make your place fun, you still have to have rules, because although children would revert to anarchy if left to themselves, they really don't like it at all. Children need order and they need to know that the adults

who care for them, are in control. However, within the structure you set up, there is so much opportunity for fun, and as a man and their dad, you are the best person to add that bit of sparkle to their world.

Involve your kids in your house hunting or flat search

Before you move into your new house or flat, try to arrange it so that you can take your children for a viewing, even if this means organising a special viewing for them. If you want your kids to feel as if your new place is also their home, then they need to feel part of it as early on as possible. You may have already made the decision of where to move, but that doesn't mean that you can't involve them a bit in the process.

Visit the house or flat for a viewing and look round together planning with them which room is going to be theirs or where they are going to sleep and talk with them about where you are going to put the furniture, or if it is already furnished, where you are going to put their stuff. However sad it is moving out of the home you have lived in together with them, there are elements of moving to a new place that are exciting, try to focus on these so that they think of the new place positively.

Let your children choose their duvet cover and pillowcase

If your children are going to stay the night at your new place, make it feel like their home, by letting them choose something personal for it. Choosing something like their own bed linen is not expensive and immediately makes them feel that

they have something special at your place. A bed is an important part of a home (we spend a third of the day in it and it is where we feel really relaxed) and for a child, it is the part of any home that is truly their space, so encouraging them to personalize their bed in this way gives you a head start on helping them to feel that this is going to be their home as well.

Make a special place in your house or flat for your kid's stuff

If your house or flat isn't big enough for your children to have their own room, then put aside some space in a cupboard which they can keep as their space. If space is really tight this can be a box or part of a cupboard. Make a label with their name on it and make sure that this space stays as theirs and doesn't get filled with yours or anybody else's stuff. At the end of your time together, help them put their stuff away in their special space so that they know where it is and know that it will be there waiting for them when they come next time.

Buy your children something personal to keep at your house

Simple everyday things are best, because they introduce normality into the situation (which is going to be strange at first). Get a couple of things like a new toothbrush or hair brush, and if they

are going to be staying the night, a set of pyjamas and a set of underclothes. These things will reduce the amount of stuff they have to bring with them from mummy's house which will make coming to stay at your place seem much more like home from home, and much less like a holiday trip, as well as making it easier for everyone.

Small children will like to bring a teddy or doll with them (called a transitional object because it helps them carry a bit of their life with them, so that they have something familiar with them at all times), but why not take them out and buy them a special teddy that stays at your place ready for them when they come to stay. However, always let them bring one or two special things with them if they want to, and remind them to bring them if you think they might have been forgotten and you know that they will miss it.

Call their other home "Mummy's House"

To start with you can call their other home, "Mummy's House" and your new place, "Daddy's House" or "Daddy's Flat". You may feel, or indeed you may still have a legal right over a part of your former marital home, but children don't understand the complicated way grown-ups have to divide up property during a separation. It is only confusing to them to try and explain this or talk as if the house where mummy now lives without you (as they see it) is still somehow yours as well.

After a while you can call your place Home when they are with you. Your children will understand that they can have two homes. Be patient but stick with it, it takes time to set up a new home, don't expect everything to fall into place in a couple of visits. After I had been in my new flat for about a year, one of my children asked me if he could call the flat, "Home", because as he said, ". . . we've been here for about a year now." This is when you know that all the hard work has paid off and things are really beginning to settle down. (see the dadcando webpage on Great Kids' Quotes)

Be involved in their social lives at every opportunity and from the earliest age possible

If your kids come to stay with you for longer than just a few hours at a time, then you should make every effort to involve yourself in a practical way with their social life. Children often have friends over to play and for tea. Usually this happens on a weekday after school, but it also happens at the

weekend. Once you are settled in to your new place and the routine has become established (after a couple of months or so), ask your children if they would like to have a friend over for tea, or to go out to the cinema with you and a friend. Hopefully you will know the names of their best friend, but don't be shy, ask them, chat to them about their school friends. If they would like this then the best way to start the ball rolling is to get the friend's mother's phone number and fix up the arrangement, parent to parent.

As your children grow up, it is important for them, and you, that you are involved in as many aspects of their normal life as possible. This won't happen, if when they come to stay with you, you treat that time as exclusively your time together. If you do that, then, as your children get older, visits to dad will eventually be seen as another separate item on their social calendar, competing with all the other things that can be done during the week or at the weekend. If instead, you treat the time they spend with you as normally as possible and make every effort to integrate it with their lives, then as they grow up they will see being with you and staying at your place as home from home, and as a natural extension of the things they do from week to week.

Play music in your house or flat

If you don't know what music your children like, ask them. When they are young, it is likely to be Disney songs or other specifically children's music, but as they grow up their tastes will change and they will get more and more into pop music. Either buy a radio or set up your CD or MP3 player to play in the background. Kid's love music and they will associate their favourite tunes with happy times.

As they grow up experiment with different music that you think they might enjoy, but don't force your favourite Bob Dylan tracks, or tunes from your youth on them to the exclusion of what they like, go with the flow, let them introduce you to new stuff, and enjoy discovering new music together.

Establish similar rules in your home to those they are used to at Mummy's House

Children are good at pushing boundaries, but don't think you are being kind to them or making them have a better time if you abandon all rules when they come to stay at your home. All children need security. They need to know that the adults who look after them are in control of the situation. Provided you give them freedom to

express themselves and are flexible when the occasion merits it, they will feel much better if they know that there is a structure to their lives.

Establish a bedtime, make sure that there are proper mealtimes and that they eat proper food when they come to stay with you. It might seem fun at first to have breakfast cereal and toast for every meal, but this will quickly turn into a nightmare. Children need consistency and need to know that you care enough about their well being to look after them properly, even if that means going to bed at bedtime, when they would love to stay up, or not watching a film that they would love to watch that is rated much higher than their age.

Save rule breaking for special occasions. Dads are good at taking calculated risks, it's something important that we as men can teach our children, so of course, occasionally you can break the rules (under the right circumstances) and then it will be a real treat.

Add sparkle to their life at your place with things like Zebra Pops

Spice up your children's lives with fun things that don't cost anything to do, but add a bit of sparkle to the daily routine. For example, take one large



Tupperware breakfast cereal container and alternately fill with chocolate rice crispies and plain rice crispies, (or any other appropriately contrasting breakfast cereals they like) and bingo, you have Zebra Pops (well that's what my kids call them). Cheaper than chocolate rice crispies on their own, better for you and 100% funkier. (You get an even mix of chocolate and plain rice crispies in every pour.)

Make it fun to do even simple things, like washing hands

Spice up your children's lives with fun things that don't cost anything to do, but add a bit of sparkle to the daily routine. Use foaming hand wash soap in the bathroom. Kids love bubbles, and the foaming soap makes loads, uses less soap and makes it easy for them to wash their hands and rinse them afterwards.



The only downside to this, is that foaming soap is more expensive than regular liquid soap or soap bars. However, there is nothing special about 'special' foaming liquid soap itself, the foaming action is a function of the pump dispenser mechanism. So when the foaming soap has run out, don't throw the pack away, refill it with the cheapest shampoo, diluted half and half with tap water. After screwing the top/pump back in place invert the dispenser a couple of times gently to mix the shampoo and water, and you've got a new full pack of foaming soap.

To make it even more fun peel off the label and draw a simple picture on the pack using a permanent marker.