

"The mural that brought me so much closer to my

Reading the conversation they were about to begin, Karla Olson and her husband, Mark, sat down at the foot of their daughter Mackenzie's bed. The six-year-old immediately stopped scribbling in her journal and peered at her parents with quizzical eyes. "Honey, we're moving," Karla said softly. But even as she touted the perks of their new home, she saw a look of horror on her child's face. "It broke my heart to see her so sad," Karla remembers.

As the Olsons prepared for their move, Mackenzie, their eldest daughter, began to withdraw. "When I brought up the new school she would be attending, she grew very quiet," says Karla.

"I tried to be positive and let her know that I was going through the same process," Karla explains. "I would miss the old house, my friends and just being able to borrow an egg from a neighbor." That didn't make Mackenzie feel better, though. She became increasingly distant and worried, and she was prone to suddenly bursting into tears. To make matters worse, the move came on more quickly than the Olsons had anticipated: Only one month after they broke the news to Mackenzie, they were unpacking boxes at their new address.

"I wanted her to feel 'home.'"

How can I get Mackenzie excited about the new house? Karla wondered. She decided to give her independent daughter a say in several decor decisions. Starting small, Karla asked for Mackenzie's ideas on storing art supplies and how to arrange books in her room. "She felt out of control, so I tried to make her feel part of the process," Karla explains. And it worked—Mackenzie's spirits lifted with each creative task she was given.

Building on this shared sense of accomplishment, Karla had a great idea: *Mackenzie can help design a paint-by-colors mural for her room!* Karla enlisted an artist friend, Tracy, to guide Mackenzie through the project.

"You're not going to tell me what it has to look like?" Mackenzie asked upon hearing her mom's proposal. Karla smiled and shook her head. Thrilled, Mackenzie selected a wall and got down to business, telling Tracy all about her favorite subjects like art, ballet and butterflies. Soon the design was complete.

"It felt wonderful to see her so empowered!"

Just as Karla had hoped, Mackenzie loved the mural and looked forward to painting in the designs every evening. She even enlisted the whole family to help out by distributing paintbrushes and assigning everyone a color: "Daddy, you get purple, Mommy gets white..." Karla could see the difference in her daughter immediately. "It was her room and she owned it," Karla recalls. "She was very confident and that made me proud."

Her renewed self-esteem helped Mackenzie adjust to her new surroundings and make friends fast. "The room provided a creative atmosphere and an anchor for her," says Karla. That's something that has made a difference in both of their lives. "What I rediscovered is that my daughter is strong and independent. I don't need to do everything for her. When I look at my beautiful daughter, I feel a wave of pride rush over me," raves Karla. "Mom doesn't always get it right, but I got this one right!"



Photos: Jim Linna. Hair and makeup: Akemi Hart. Text: Helen Matatov.



daughter”

Karla Olson, 38,
with her daughter
Mackenzie, 7,
Issaquah, WA

How creativity cultivates calm

Artistic time-outs such as painting a mural, assembling a model or even doodling on a sketch pad can be ideal for helping kids work through stressful situations, says Jonathan Alpert, a psychotherapist in New York City who regularly treats children with anxiety. Artistic outlets can help:

1. Clarify the source of the stress.

“When kids lack the words to express themselves adequately, art can help them communicate pent-up emotions that otherwise wouldn’t come out,” Alpert explains. “This creates an opportunity for discussing these feelings with a parent or friend.”

2. Offer a temporary escape.

“As human beings, we cannot think of something positive and something negative at exactly the same time,” maintains psychologist Carl G. Arinoldo, Ph.D., coauthor of *Essentials of Smart Parenting* (Kroshka Books, 2007). He explains that finding an enjoyable activity to focus on serves as a mini mental vacation from the stress-provoking issue. When the child then turns her attention back to the stressor, she’ll have more positive associations and her mind will be more relaxed and open to working through the problem.

3. Provide the strength to deal.

Pride in one’s creative efforts boosts self-esteem, says Arinoldo. “Kids with high self-esteem tend to be better problem solvers and better decision makers,” he explains. “These children gain the confidence they need to be more resilient. And resilient kids handle stress better.”