

Helping Children Make Transitions

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Children experience many transitions during the early childhood years, particularly if they are in full day programs. They transition from home to the car or stroller, from the car or stroller to school, from the school hallway to the classroom, from parent or other family member to the teacher or her substitute, from the family to the peer group, from the warmth and familiar home setting to the more institutional school setting, from one set of expectations for behavior to another, from outside to inside and then outside again, from breakfast to playtime and then to nap, and so forth.

Some of these transitions are significant ones, others are much less important yet still critical to the quality of the child's experience at school. Despite the significance or intensity, transitions can be fun, challenging, scary, distracting, or upsetting to children. In this article, we propose a three-step process for transitions — all kinds of transitions. Although we give considerable attention to transitioning to school, between teachers or between classrooms, and between settings, most of the characteristics of good transition planning are similar.

The family, the school and teacher, and the child are all connected together and impacted by transitions. Good plans for important transitions have similar features that take into consideration the point of view of each participant, accommodating, modifying, and collaborating to construct the best plan for the individuals involved.

We suggest creating a "transition as a way of life" mentality. Transitions are a part of life — they happen all of the time. When viewed as a regular and frequent occurrence, not a special one-time event, programs can teach children transitioning skills, preparing them for successful passage through myriad life changes.

We also recommend a multi-dimensional process for planning, implementing, and evaluating the big transitions. This

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process is not prescriptive — there is no right or wrong way to do it. As long as it is created or modified for each family, child, and teacher, transition plans will be sure to support the three important constituencies — child, family, and teacher.

Step 1: Prepare the family, child, classroom, and program for transition

Preparing the Family

Regardless of the age of the child, family members can help prepare their children for the transition by visiting the new school and classroom in advance. Visits to the classroom before the child must stay for the full program are the place to begin. Visits like these make the first step of the transition a gentle one, supported by a family member and not requiring separation. When families can manage it, several visits are optimal.

Parents or family members and staff should have several conversations. Some of the conversations will be with administrative staff, clarifying policies and procedures, reviewing the program calendar, and planning the logistics of gradual enrollment process. Others will be between the teacher and the family designed to share information about each other, explore concerns, ask questions, and fine tune the gradual enrollment plan to meet the family's and child's needs.

Preparing the Child

Even very young children need to hear about the transition plans from their family members. Talking about the plan and how it will unfold allows parents to uncover concerns, fears, and anxiety or excitement and anticipation.

Preparing the Classroom

Two types of classroom preparation are necessary. One is to welcome the child and family such as labeling a cubbie, identifying where the child will nap, or adding names and photos to the classroom. The other is curriculum planning to support transitions. A good transition curriculum creates freedom for

the teacher to attend to the transitioning child and family while maintaining the other children's interests in what is going on in the classroom.

Preparing the Program

Additional support is often needed during transitions, both from management and from the other teachers in the program. It is difficult to get to know a new family unless a priority is given to the process. Resources that increase the success of transitions include extra teaching help during the transition so the teacher can focus her attention on the new children, release time from classroom responsibilities to meet with the family, time to plan, evaluate, and reflect on transitions, and modification of schedules to have the new child's teacher present at arrival time during the transition period.

Other teachers in the center can help support the family by greeting them and introducing themselves. This is especially true for tenured teachers with years of experience. These teachers have a wealth of experience with transitioning and can be very supportive of new families.

Preparing Other Children and Their Families

Before the new child begins to transition, talk about the new friend who will join the group. For younger children, add a laminated photo of the new child to acquaint children with the new face. For older children, ask them to remember what it was like to be in a new place. Discuss ways to make friends or include the new child in activities. Anticipatory socialization activities like this help children use social skills appropriately when new children

Curriculum Activities for Transitioning Infants

Talk, Talk, Talk! Talk to the child and the family as you explain what you are doing as you do activities with other infants in the classroom. Give the transitioning infant time to get familiar with your voice as you explain to the family why you do things a particular way. Postpone direct interactions with the child until both the child and the family are ready.

- **Foot Painting** — Place large craft paper on the wall near the floor. Paint child's feet with warm tempera paint. Kicks will result in a footprint!
- **Touching Water** — Place a shallow container on the tray of a low chair or table and let child touch the water. Change the experience by changing the water's temperature or color, adding toys, or adding texture.

Curriculum Activities for Transitioning Toddlers

Select activities that won't add stress for the teacher during the time when a new child or family is in the classroom. Plan familiar activities that keep the children already enrolled interested and on task, so you can invest in establishing a relationship with the new child and family.

- **Table Drawing** — Cover a table completely with butcher paper. Add markers, crayons, or colored chalk.
- **Contact Paper Collage** — Cover a table with contact paper, sticky side up. Place a collection of things to add to the collage near by.

- **What I Like** — Put out vehicles, animals, trains, dolls, insects, etc., as block supports to discover the new child's interests.
- **Counting Children** — Count children by number whenever you are transitioning to a new activity. Remind children that a new child has joined the group so the number of children has changed.
- **Book Reading** — Ask new parents to bring in the child's favorite books.

Curriculum Activities for Transitioning Preschoolers

Include children in welcoming a new child. Ask for their input about ways to make new children feel welcome. Build on children's natural curiosity to create a welcoming environment and a willingness to participate and help.

- **Make a Welcome Sign** — Talk about the new friend who will join the group and make a sign for him or her.
- **Face Collage** — Talk about faces, look at faces in a mirror, and cut out facial features to add to face-shaped construction paper.
- **Counting Fingers/Children** — Count children during group time, then fingers, then feet, etc.
- **Books** — Add books about friendship and transitions to the library area.
- **Make Goo** — Mix liquid starch and glue in a one-to-one ratio.

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

arrive or when they experience similar situations outside the school setting.

Parents or family members of enrolled children need advance notice of the arrival of new children. Announce the new family with a family photo on the bulletin board and introduce new family members to others during gradual enrollment and at arrival and departure times.

Step 2: Establish three-way information sharing

Communication between the family and the school

Keeping the lines of communication open with the family is essential in building a trustful relationship. When the family feels that they can share any concerns with the teacher and vice versa, partnerships emerge. Families and teachers must also be able to expect an honest and concise response to those concerns. Sharing information between the teacher and the family helps build this trust. Written and verbal information are both important.

Verbal communication is so important during transitions. When families get information and feedback during the process, anxiety and fear of the unknown goes away. Use the telephone during transitions. Hearing about how things are going during the initial stages of transition can be extremely helpful. Conversations at drop off or pick up are also essential. If the child's primary teacher is not present at arrival or departure, special accommodations will need to be made to ensure communication.

Plan for parent or family initiated conferences early in the transition process. Families will likely need conversations to allay fears, to discuss routines like eating and napping, or to just touch base about how they feel the transition is going. Written information includes notes, observations, and assessments. Daily records can be used to share anecdotes of the day's experience. Daily records give parents and family members information at a glance and serve as documentation of what the day was like. Observation notes share the child's experiences with the curriculum as well as with daily routines. Document these experiences with photographs and share your notes and the photos with families. Documentation enables the family see what the child is doing and learning at

school. Assessments help families see their child's growth as compared to developmental norms or to other same age children. This broader view of the child in the context of school is an important reference for the family and the teacher.

Communication between the family and teacher

Parents and family members have a role in information sharing. Because you do not yet know their child as well as they do, build in a way to share this information. Checklists or questionnaires are a start that can later be supplemented by sharing observations and insights in other ways.

Step 3: Expect transitions to take time

Transitions should take a gradual approach. Rather than requiring the child to make the transition all at once, spread out the process across time. In general, transitions that start slowly with visits to the school, then short days, then longer days with visits from a family member during the day are more successful.

For infants and toddlers, we recommend (and have had the most success with) transitions that last anywhere from two to six weeks. For preschoolers, we recommend at least a three-day process, following the child's lead about the pace and timing.

It is a shared responsibility to make sure the child's transition succeeds. Begin this partnership by creating a plan, either in a face-to-face conference or by telephone or e-mail contacts. During this conversation, the teacher, in consultation with the family, can structure a plan that will work for this child, this family, this teacher, and this classroom of children and this school.

Once the child arrives at school for the first day of gradual enrollment, the teacher needs to do everything within his/her power to make the child feel comfortable in the new environment. Immediate greetings of family members, introductions, classroom tours, help with finding a place to put things, finding something to do or a place to sit and watch, and identifying a play peer to invite the child to play with are all good examples of things to try. When children are cautious or slow to warm to new settings, interact through the family member or a toy. This technique is called triangulation and prevents children from being overwhelmed by the need to interact with an unfamiliar person. If you are talking to mom

Vignette: Hailey

Hailey enrolled in my class at 28 months. She spent the first two years of her life staying with her grandma while her parents were at work. Needless to say, this bond was tight! She enrolled in another school for one week and reportedly cried the whole week. She didn't even want to stay at Grandma's anymore. Grandma, Mom, and Hailey came in to meet me and observe the class on the first day. They stayed for about three hours. The next day just Grandma and Hailey came to school, but this time they were more involved. I planned an activity that I thought Hailey might like (from what her parents told me). Over the next few days, Grandma began sitting back and letting Hailey interact more with me and the other children. The next week Grandma left the classroom for a little while and then came back. This helped Hailey see me as someone she could depend on when her Grandma was gone. We were building trust in each other.

Grandma was able to set limits to read one book or sing one song each day before she left. She always reminded Hailey that she would be back soon. Consistency and follow through always make a transition go smoothly. When Hailey got upset I reassured her that Grandma would be back and tried to help her transition to a favorite activity. I discovered she loved bubbles, play dough, and painting. Grandma brought Hailey's favorite stuffed animals and a picture album of her family members to make her feel safe. Items from home are familiar and comfortable and are big supports in establishing security.

Hailey's biggest hurdle was naptime. She did not want to go to sleep and verbalized this very well. I told her that she did not have to sleep, just rest quietly. I patted her back and lay close to her. Hailey soon learned the daily schedule and expectations for our class and I developed an understanding of her needs and interest. She also began to make friends. After a few weeks Hailey ran into the classroom, excited about her day with her friends and me.

or playing with the blocks and interacting through the play, children will be more likely to relax and join in.

Early in the gradual enrollment process, the teacher needs to focus on accompanying family members. Take some time to explore feelings about the transition process, update informa-

tion previously gathered, discuss favorite activities, identify health concerns or problems, share the classroom schedule, or plan arrival and departure times and routine. Any questions and concerns that parents or family members have can also be addressed at this time.

Shorter visits give way to longer ones. By the time this process is complete, the child, the family, the teacher, and the other children in the group should feel comfortable with each other and in the classroom setting.

When transitions are approached this way, children are successful in transitioning, families feel connected and validated as partners in their child's care and early education, and teachers develop strong, reciprocal relationships with children and their families on which to base their teaching. As the teacher grows to know the child and the family he/she will learn about these differences and discover the answers to these questions.

Any of the following can be part of your transition to school plan:

- Family visits
- Home visits
- Discussions with the child by family members about going to a new school
- Gradual enrollment visits that start off briefly with family support and continue to short, unsupported visits with family members still in the building, to longer visits without family members
- Enrollment planning meetings between parents or other family members and teachers as well as with program administrators
- Family-teacher check in points during the enrollment process
- Family-administrator check in points during the enrollment process

it out:

"Helping Children Make Transitions"
Additional text and training tips on other transitions
is posted in
"Free Articles" online: www.ChildCareExchange.com

Transition strategies can help prevent meltdowns and lower anxiety in children. For some kids, such as children with autism, ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorder, PTSD, or other special needs, transitions are even more difficult. This can lead to challenging behaviours. All children, and particularly those with special needs need a sense of predictability. Offer sensory breaks. Sensory activities make great transition bridges. Check out these sensory break cards for home or these sensory break cards for the classroom. Use a transition object. For some children, having their special blanket, doll, or stuffed animal with them can smooth transitions. This is especially true in the case of a child transitioning from one location to another such as from home to school or from home to preschool.