

Transitions

There are at least two kinds of transitions in young children's experience:

- 1) Major transitions, such as children entering child care, preschool or school
- 2) Moving from one segment or part of the day to another.

We could refer to these as "big transitions" and "little transitions". Let's look at the big ones first. For all of us, beginnings and endings are significant. They often have a heady mix of conflicting feelings attached to them: anticipation, excitement, insecurity, sadness and loss, and a bit of fear of the unknown. So it is with children. When children begin participating in a children's service, or are faced with any other major change to their daily experience, these big transitions need attention. Obviously the particular ways of dealing with them will depend on the age of the child and the circumstances, but some general points can be made that apply to all age groups:

- Do them as gently as possible, incrementally if possible. The "throw them in at the deep end" approach hardly ever, if ever, works well in helping children settle in to a new experience. Avoid all or nothing. Incremental changes are often better than sudden abrupt ones.
- Spending small amounts of time in a new place make it easier to become accustomed to it.
- Rituals help. For example, being held by someone familiar and seeing Mummy through the door, or waving goodbye and watching through a window as Dad goes through the gate to his car can make it easier. Routines and rituals give comfort through providing security, predictability.
- Taking something familiar into the unfamiliar is comforting. Maybe it's a loved blanket from home, being allowed to take your favourite cup into the three year old group when you "move up", or going for visits to the new place with a familiar and loved friend or family member -- the familiar and comfortable help all of us adjust to the new and unfamiliar.
- Don't pre-judge; rather be an astute observer of your child. Try to find out how he or she is feeling. In many situations it is helpful if we "put ourselves in their shoes", but at the same time we shouldn't automatically presume to know how children feel in a particular situation. We must be tuned into them to find out.
- Be empathetic. Give time, give encouragement, give support. It takes all of us time to adjust. It takes some of us longer than others.

When it comes to the big transitions for children, acknowledge your own feelings as well, which may not be dissimilar to those of children. Insist on knowing what's happening. Be involved in the decision making about your child's experience. Remember that it will take time for you to feel comfortable. Work with the people looking after your child as partners. In doing so, keep your focus on what's in the child's best interests.

Little transitions, interestingly enough, are made easier by applying many of the same points that are relevant to major transitions. When moving from inside to outside, outside to lunch, play time to rest or bath time, lunch to rest or sleep, home to child care or the other transitions that are part of the child's day, the aim is to make them as seamless as possible.

- Avoid abrupt and dramatic shifts. As an example, it would be wonderful if there were a way to transform an energetic two year old outside running about and exploring into a sedentary two year old sitting quietly at the table and waiting for her lunch to arrive, but it isn't likely. Rather than thinking of transition times as simply the markers between this and that, think of ways to help your child calm down, or move on to the next thing. Seamlessness is the aim; avoid abruptness wherever possible.
- Give warnings about what is to come. Suddenly announcing that it is time for a bath, or time to come sit at the table, or worst of all time to go to bed, is asking for resistance.
- Involve your child as an active participant in transitions rather than treating her or him as a sheep to be herded. Give the child a task to complete – choose a book, put the cups on the table, get the face washer. Children should be active participants in their own daily routine, not passive recipients of it.
- Avoid sharp contrasts. Many of us find it difficult to go to sleep immediately after returning home from an exciting performance or a challenging lively meeting. So it is with children. It doesn't make sense to try to get a child to move immediately from active outside play to sitting down quietly at the table, or to sleep or rest.
- Use prompts in the physical environment to aid transitions. Dimming or strengthening the lighting or playing appropriate music can signal transitions to a child and establish a kind of mood that sets the scene for what is to come. For example, gentle soothing music helps to wind down, relax, and go off to sleep or have a quiet rest.
- Minimise waiting and "empty time". Time spent waiting is wasted time. Individualisation, mentioned above, tends to minimise waiting.

Transitions, large or small, contribute to the quality of our days and children's days. It is important that they are treated sensitively and in ways that contribute to children's well-being.

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