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thinking children

A NEWSLETTER OF THE **Learning Resource Network**

Transitions: What Makes Them So Difficult?

“**Y**our child is having trouble with *transitions...*” is a phrase many parents have heard and many of them have wondered just what it meant. Nursery school teachers say it when a child resists going from one activity to another, for instance when she won't leave the painting easel to join the circle time. Third grade teachers might say it when a child has trouble settling down to do worksheets after recess. A sixth grade teacher might be talking about the change from elementary school to middle school: a transition not within the daily routine but rather from one school to another. Likewise a high school counselor might be talking about the change in social life that accompanies entering the tenth grade and thus not about a change from one school to another but from one time in life to another.

Are all these transitions different instances of the same basic process? Will the little girl who has trouble “transitioning” from art to group time also have trouble going from play to work a few years later and from the relatively protected environment of the elementary school to the rough and tumble of middle school, a few years after that? Can we assume as well that she will balk at the changes that puberty brings and at the social pressures that change with teenage life?

One thing we know for sure: child development is rarely that predictable. As with most of the topics we have covered in these pages, transitions and the challenges that they present must be viewed in the particular context in which they arise. One child's “trouble with transitions” will not necessarily mean the same thing as another's. Nor is it true that if a child struggles with a transition at one point in her life, that she will at all times. Indeed the likelihood is that the behaviors will always mean something slightly (or even greatly) different in every case. Nevertheless, there are some common themes that arise in this matter that we thought worth devoting an issue to. After all, it is that time of year when one transition at least is on every school child's mind: from school year to summer vacation.

Transition (and its root word: *Transit*) simply means to go from one place to another. It means a change in place. However, it can also mean a change in time, as in the transition from day to night. It can also mean a change in one's state over time, as in the transition from infancy to early childhood. A change in place, a passage in time, an alteration in one's state of being, what it means, all in all, is *change*. To ask why a child is having trouble with transitions is to ask why a child might have trouble with change. And while there are certain specific transitions with which a child struggles, it may be a general fear of change that is at work.

For over 100 years, the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, Inc. has been at the forefront of providing help and support to New Yorkers in need through a wide range of child and family programs. The Learning Resource Network is one such program, offering consultation and support services to assist parents concerned with child development and learning issues.

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Transitions: What Makes Them So Difficult?

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One word of caution, as with all general processes in child development, both individual and developmental differences will be vast. Change may be a universal challenge but we each find unique ways to approach that challenge and eventually work through it. Some children relish the chance and some dread it. In addition there will be real developmental differences. We wouldn't expect the most resilient five year-old to be able to address the changes that the average 14 year-old faces in the throes of puberty. The adventurous eight year-old who seems up to any challenge and ready for anything new can sometimes turn into a shy and hesitant 15 year-old when faced by the transitions that accompany that age.

In thinking about the problem of transitions, it is important to note that change is itself one of the fundamental defining principles of children's lives. They are in an ongoing state of change. In this sense, we could say that children are constantly facing transitions. In truth we all are, but it gets much easier to ignore this truth when the apparent stability of adulthood sets in. During childhood there is no such shelter from the truth of life's constant mutability. They are dealing with the change and transition of growth and development all the time. Some appear to relish change. They seem to have an appetite for new situations and new stimuli. While others seek the relative shelter of a familiar corner and mightily resist the teacher's or parent's efforts to lure them out. They are in "their own little world" where things remain the same and like Peter Pan, they won't grow up! The impulse to stop the clock, to halt the relentless changes of childhood, may be one of the fundamental ideas expressed by those children who have difficulty with transitions. It is as if the child is saying, "Let me stay where I am. I know what to do here. I don't know if I will be OK doing that." Naturally, we adults know that they must deal with new people, places and tasks so we insist on it. However, a sympathetic understanding for why they don't want to is a good place to start creating a bridge between their perspective and ours.

Of course, there are those children who can't wait to grow up, who seem impatient with how slowly the transitions come. They represent a different challenge, the other side of the coin, from the children who struggle against change. They may need a gentle reminder, some limit-setting, about what is safe or what is realistic to expect or accomplish.

There are other basic ideas that we should take into account in gaining a sympathetic understanding of children's resistance to change. For instance, there is the question of who is in control. To go from one place to another always involves a series of decisions: where to go, when to start, how quickly to get there, etc. One conflict that often arises over the matter of transitions is just who gets to make these decisions. The teacher proposes, "In five minutes it will be time to put the blocks (or math books) away and get ready for a meeting." Children, who struggle all the time with mastering their world and the skills it takes to survive in it, must put aside their impulse to ask "Oh yeah, why five minutes?" and conform to the transition on terms decided by another. The skillful teacher (and parent) knows how to finesse these moments, how to give enough decision-making autonomy to children often enough so that they might feel inclined to reciprocate when the time comes. But no one can ever get this right all the time and certainly not when several or a classroom full of children are involved. In this instance the trouble with transition is about conflict between authority and autonomy: a common enough one in many lives.

A third basic idea about transitions is the fact that all change implies an encounter with the unknown, with something new and as yet untried. For some children this is an inherent attraction. They are change lovers, risk takers. For many others, however, and probably for all children at least at some point or another, this frightens them. The unknown, and all that they imagine about the new possibilities, is simply too strange, perhaps too challenging to be welcomed. The larger life transitions like puberty or entering high school are likely to trigger these reactions. Perhaps it addresses why Peter Pan won't grow up: "because I don't know what I might encounter there."

Change and the Unknown: they can make life interesting and they can make it terrifying. Sometimes it is not easy to tell those reactions apart. The child who is "having trouble with transitions" may well be the child whose sensitivity to the Unknown will later contribute to an inventive and searching mind. If we recognize the meaning underlying their reactions, we are that much better able to help children work through them. Having the experience of working through such moments, at his/her own pace, leaves the child with the feeling, indeed the confidence, that he/she can master a new challenge next time.



— DAVID LICHTENSTEIN, PH.D.

A Closer Look at Transitions...

Below are 4 short vignettes that illustrate real-life examples of dealing with tough transitions.

DO:
Facilitate opportunities for conversation about situations that make your child apprehensive.

DON'T:
Project your anxiety on your child

11 year-old Samantha was going to her first coed school dance. Usually, she is a self-confident girl who likes the way she looks and who enjoys the social world of preadolescence. On this night, however, as she was getting dressed for the dance, her mother noticed that Samantha was uncharacteristically self-conscious — and (ironically) more conversational. “How should I do my hair?” “Do you think my friends will like my dress?” “Will anybody ask me to dance?” Her mother responded to Samantha’s questions with constructive pointers about correct behavior.

Developmentally, it is totally understandable that Samantha would be feeling some apprehension about the dance. Though her mother certainly meant well, she probably made Samantha more anxious with her “pointers.”

DO:
Help identify the challenges and successes of your child’s experience, even if the end result is not what was hoped for.

DON'T:
Focus only on success or failure

9 year-old Tim didn’t want to go to sleep-away camp, was pushed to do so by his parents, and had a miserable time. At the end of the first session, he begged his parents to come home. His parents struggled with what would be best. They finally allowed him to go home instead of staying for the remainder of the summer. When Tim spoke about his camp experience several months later, it was clear that, although he wished he would have been happier there, he was proud of himself for being able to stay a month.

Small steps of accomplishment help children feel greater trust in themselves.

DO:
Have realistic expectations for your child

DON'T:
Exaggerate your child’s accomplishments

14 year-old Amanda was moving to a new community and would be attending a high school specializing in the arts. In her old school, she achieved a certain celebrity status because of her talent in dancing, and was worried about finding her place in her new school. Her parents, hoping to ease her anxiety about the move, reassured her that nothing would change — that she would be the “best” dancer and that everybody would love her. Unfortunately, Amanda was faced with a different reality the following September. Though certainly a competent dancer, she was not alone in talent and there were many others like her. Her anxiety turned to rage. What became clear was that the dancing was only one part of Amanda’s upset and that she worried also about having disappointed her parents who were themselves having a difficult time adjusting to the new community.

Our children care deeply about our perceptions and expectations of them. Often, our intention is to be supportive and encouraging but what is heard is experienced as a pressure to excel.

A Closer Look at Transitions...

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DO:

Keep a balance between sensitivity to your child's anxiety and your role as an adult in setting appropriate expectations and limits

DON'T:

Allow your empathy for your child's anxiety about transition to interfere with your sense of his/her capabilities

5 year-old Josh was having a very difficult time adjusting to kindergarten and separating from his mother. His teacher, hoping to ease his anxiety, introduced him to the guidance counselor who she said he could visit whenever he felt uncomfortable in the classroom. Josh visited frequently, so frequently that he was spending close to entire days in her office. Josh's parents became more and more worried about his escalating anxiety and asked for a meeting at the school. In thinking about Josh's anxiety, the hypothesis was made that, unintentionally, the relationship with the guidance counselor had come to serve a counterproductive purpose; namely, to allow Josh to avoid the challenge of his transition to kindergarten. Since Josh seemed like a well-developing, bright child who had many strengths both academically and socially, it was decided that both his parents and teacher would talk with Josh and explain that he was a big boy who was able to stay in the classroom and that they would be there to help him if he needed it, but that they thought he was certainly able to enjoy being in kindergarten. The shift was amazing. Josh immediately became a comfortable and productive member of the classroom.

It is a gift to our children if we help them realize that they are capable of getting through difficult moments, and teach them the pleasure of knowing that they have mastered something that was outside of their comfort zone.

The following are stories from some of our readers about their experiences with transitions. We are always grateful to those who contribute their own stories.

I have a love-hate relationship with change. On the one hand, I dread it, and always have. So much so that it's a joke in my family — "Honey, we moved the silverware to another drawer. Don't get upset." On the other hand, I voluntarily opt for change a lot in my life — moving to different cities, traveling to far-off places, switching jobs. Is that a contradiction? I don't think so. Every transition in life has an element of the unknown, and that can be both exciting — "who knows what can happen?" — and frightening — "who knows what can happen?" For me, the key to dealing with change is embracing the limitless possibilities without being paralyzed with the, well, limitless possibilities. —MW

Being a recent college graduate I moved from my mild and lucid life in the mid-west to Manhattan. Four months later there is nothing even vaguely reminiscent of my old life. I had to tailor myself for the change I had chosen. I went from tee-shirts and tailgating to stilettos and spreadsheets. The changes were shocking, and with a new job and a barrage of unfamiliarity I wanted to hop the next flight back to Wisconsin. Fortunately, my perseverance landed me a position in exactly my area of interest. These choices are never easy, but if they were, the pay off wouldn't be nearly as great. —KD

When my son went off to college 4 years ago I considered that a major milestone in his and my life. I viewed this transition as a break in our family unit and was saddened by that thought, although excited for him. Four years later — I view college as an extension of the school experience for both my son and our family. He is still a very integral part of the family, just living in another place. In fact, we all have enjoyed his college experience immensely. I look now towards his impending graduation from college and his entering the working world where I suppose his real break from us will come. But in my heart I have come to believe that each milestone is just a slow transition to a new place, giving everyone enough time to adjust before the next one. —GH

I have a child who has always had problems with transitions. It has gotten better as he has gotten older, but it's still an issue. Fortunately, the good news is that a child who has a problem with transitions may also be a child who likes to learn about new things in great detail. —SRH

Children And Transition

I'm sure we all remember how we felt when we said "good-bye" to our 5 year-old son on his first day of kindergarten, or to our 9 year-old daughter as she got on the bus for her first year of sleep-away camp. Though each of our "good-byes" was uniquely ours, I suspect that we all experienced some form of "Will *they* be OK?" as we left to go on with our day. And, for some of us, what probably followed was the very quiet thought of "Will *we* be OK?" It undoubtedly reminded us of our history with transitions — the ones that worked out well and the ones that didn't.

All of our lives are filled with transitions and we each have a different style of getting through them. Some of us enjoy the challenge of something new; others have an all-too familiar pit in our stomach when we know that a change is forthcoming. There have been unexpected transitions — some welcomed and exciting; others unanticipated and upsetting. For all of these, we have had to figure out how to mobilize our strengths in order to master the situation. And, as parents, we must help our children do the same.

Though an actual "transition" takes place at an exact moment in time (*the family will move on March 10, Sarah will begin her new camp on June 25*), the process of transition starts much before and ends much after that moment. How we each approach this process of transition — and how we help our children — is going to depend on our experiences with dealing with the unknown and the unfamiliar. Each transition is enriched by those that have come before and (hopefully) each is made easier by our increased confidence in our ability to deal with change.

When our children are faced with a transition that scares them or that makes them unhappy, we are unhappy because they are unhappy. Our difficulties in dealing with the transitions in our lives may make us more apprehensive about the transitions that face our children, but we should never assume that they will have difficulty just because we did. When we become anxious, we only increase our children's anxiety. As it is important for us to learn how to modulate our anxiety, we must be able to help our children control theirs. We must always remember that it is *our*

relationship with them that will provide them with the ability to manage their anxiety. Some children will need a great deal of support in making the unfamiliar less scary; others will need much less. For some, we will need to help them develop trust in their capabilities; others will be more relaxed in the face of these transitions. What we need to know, though, is that most of us worry about the same thing — "Are we *going to be OK?*" And that, most of the time, we can reassure our children that they *will* be!

When children play, we smile when we see our children imitating things that we do. We see them creating stories about new houses and new schools, about mommy starting a new job, about daddy being transferred to a different department. And, in this play, we see the differences in individual style. Some children play by imagining what will be and by asking lots of questions. Others act as if the "transition" doesn't exist, playing around it with no overt sense that something new is going to occur. As children grow older, we see them preparing for transitions in conversation and behavior — by asking us lots of questions, by showing behaviors that indicate their vulnerability, perhaps even by acting up in ways that are uncharacteristic. It is very important that we try to understand what they are communicating (both in conversation and in behavior) and that we let them know that we understand. It will be a relief to them to know that we are not made anxious by their anxiety, that what they are feeling is perfectly understandable and "normal" and that, even if they would prefer to keep things just the way they are, they will find things that will make them happy as they move forward.

For some transitions, there are no real choices. A child enters kindergarten at a certain age and proceeds with the transitions of schooling — middle school, high school and college. We may choose to have our child postpone first grade for an extra year; we may struggle with which school our child will attend; we may decide to transfer to another school if we don't feel the "fit" is a good one — but, usually, the onward progression of educational transitions occurs with some degree of predictability. Our children's attitude

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Children And Transition

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toward these changes will mirror the feelings they have about themselves in the social/academic world. Do they feel successful? Have they shown resilience when something unpleasant has happened to them in school — a poor grade, a clique that left them out?

There are some transitions, however, about which we do have choices. Whether our child should go to camp after fourth grade (even if all of his friends are going) is going to depend on our understanding of our child's development and our assessment as to whether s/he is ready for such an experience. Is she ready to be separated from us? Is he going to be comfortable in the social community? Do her strengths and style match the style and competitiveness of the camp? And deciding to which colleges your child should apply has similar questions attached to it.

As parents, our relationships are the primary influences on our children's development of a sense of competence and resilience. We can help them anticipate what to expect as a transition approaches, we can brainstorm strategies and we are in the best position to be reassuring and supportive. In the long run, however, the most important gift we can give our children is to let them know that they are able to meet difficult moments with a balance of apprehension and optimism.



— MARSHA WINOKUR, PH.D.

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