

Parent Aware Tip Sheets

Transitions

Why are transitions important?

Transitions are a normal part of everyday life. Children, whether in care or not, experience transitions between activities and between the various places where they spend their day. For example, children transition from indoor play to outdoor play and from active play to nap time. These small, routine changes help children learn important life skills such as flexibility and the ability to adapt to new situations. These routine transitions require planning and careful supervision. But children in care also experience some more significant transitions. These transitions occur when children start in the program, when they move from one level of the program to the next, when they experience a change in caregivers, and when they leave the program to go on to kindergarten.

What makes transitions difficult for children?

Transitions can be challenging for children, for family members and for caregivers. People react to transitions differently based on their temperament, personality and past experiences. For example, some children are extremely flexible and navigate transition smoothly. Other children may find almost any transition difficult and upsetting. Some of the challenges associated with transitions include:

- Changes in caregivers and attachments. Once a child is attached to a caregiver (including a parent) changes to a new caregiver require adjustment. And, at certain ages, children have a difficult time meeting new people, getting to know strangers, and forming new attachments.
- Changes in routines. Children like routines and respond well to predictable environments. When children move to a new program or have new caregivers, the daily routine often changes. Learning the new routine and the expectations that go with the new routine can be very challenging for children.
- Changes in communication and the exchange of information. Caregivers and family members must communicate frequently to provide high quality care for children. When relationships change with transitions, communication also changes.

What are some tips that can help children with transitions?

Despite these challenges, the disruptions associated with transitions can be reduced using the following effective strategies:

Minimize Transitions. Caregivers can reduce the number of transitions children make while in the program. One of the advantages often associated with family child care is that children typically remain with one caregiver during their time in care. In center-based care it is unusual for children to remain with one caregiver or even in the same classroom during their entire enrollment. However, center-based programs can be organized so that children make as few transitions as possible or so that at least one caregiver moves with the children from one classroom to the next when transitions must take place.

Before the Transition

- Prepare family members and caregivers for transitions by identifying transition times in advance. When families enroll, describe the typical transition times in the program – infant to toddler, toddler to preschool, etc. Also, explain when transitions will take place. Some programs implement transitions at one time of year. Other programs plan for children to move to a new program when the child's age allows for a different adult-to-child ratio.
- Involve family members in planning for transitions well in advance. Many caregivers meet with families or use a regularly scheduled conference time to discuss upcoming transitions. Whenever possible, discuss options and solicit the parent's preferences about transitions. Also, ask parents about their child's typical reaction to transitions.
- Prepare for children's reactions to transitions. Caregivers and parents should be prepared for children to be anxious, fearful and potentially withdrawn during transitions. Caregivers and parents will need to be prepared to respond to children's emotions and challenging behaviors.
- Prepare children for the upcoming transitions. Discuss what will be the same and what will be different. Focus on the positive aspects of the transition.
- Create a transition plan. When children are starting in the program or changing caregivers or changing classrooms, caregivers and parents can create a plan for a smooth and gradual transition. The transition plan might include:
 - Meeting with the new caregiver
 - Observing the new classroom
 - Visiting the new classroom over time for increasing periods of time.

During and Following the Transition

- Whenever possible, make changes in small, slow steps. Gradually increase the amount of time the child is in the new environment.
- Keep as many things consistent for the child as possible. For example, allow the child to bring familiar objects to the new environment, keep daily schedules similar, serve familiar foods.
- Whenever possible, move at least a few children to a new classroom together. This allows children to have a few familiar friends in the new environment.
- Pay attention to children's adjustment to the new caregiver or environment. Watch for challenging behaviors or losses in development. For example, a child who was previously potty trained may start having frequent accidents following a transition. If these behaviors do not diminish over time, seek the input of family members.
- Be kind, compassionate and patient. Change is not easy for children, family members or even caregivers. Remember that children have less experience handling transitions than adults. Transitions are an opportunity for children to learn about flexibility and adaptation; but caregivers must support them in learning these skills.
- Maintain communication with family members. Children may demonstrate their reaction to change at home or at the program. Communicating with family members helps to keep the child's care consistent and to make the transition smooth for all involved.

How can you help with a child's next transition to kindergarten?

One transition that nearly all children experience is the transition from the program to kindergarten. This transition is special in that there is a great deal of time to prepare, it is a highly emotional time for family members, and it often involves working closely with professionals from outside the program. Also, increasingly, research shows that handling this transition well aids in children's success in kindergarten.

The following suggestions can help to create a smooth transition to kindergarten for children and their family members:

- Make contact with kindergarten teachers in area schools. It may be impractical for caregivers to know every kindergarten teacher in every school; however caregivers can establish a few relationships to learn general expectations in the school district.
- Determine when kindergarten screening and informational meetings take place in area schools. In early fall, contact local schools to determine dates for kindergarten transition activities during the school year.
- Provide information to families a year before kindergarten transition. Inform parents of important dates such as kindergarten screening or information meetings. Offer parents any resource material about the kindergarten that is available.
- If possible, arrange for kindergarten teachers to visit the pre-school program.
- Encourage parents to visit the kindergarten program to observe, to meet teachers, and to learn about the school and its program.
- When possible, make connections among families who will attend the same kindergarten programs or elementary schools.